

THE HERMENEUTICS OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY: A CRITICAL LOOK AT ITS CHRISTOLOGICAL, HARMATIOLOGICAL, AND SOTERIO-LOGICAL DIMENSIONS

Dr. Christian O. Uchegbue
Department of Religious Studies
University of Calabar
Calabar, Nigeria
(uchegbue@yahoo.com)

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines how the concern of liberation theology with making theology relevant to the poor and oppressed in their socio-political struggle for justice influences their interpretation and application of the Bible. Three theological themes, namely, Christology (the doctrine of Christ), harmatology, (the doctrine of sin), and soteriology (the doctrine of salvation), are chosen to demonstrate its hermeneutical perspectives. The paper sympathizes with the humanistic and humanitarian motivations of liberation theologians and their concern with the plight of the poor and the oppressed. However, it points out many of its inconsistencies with traditional Christian stand on these themes. It concludes, therefore, that liberation theology's hermeneutics has much more in common with Marxist than Christian hermeneutics.

Liberation theology is a revolutionary religious movement which adopts a radical understanding of the Christian faith. According to *The Encyclopedia Americana*, it emphasizes the political nature of the Christian faith as well as the social mission of the Church.¹ Owing to its revolutionary outlook, Charles Villa-Vicencio understands liberation theology as an umbrella term which embraces a host of specific or particular radical movements among which are African theology, black theology, feminist theology, and womanist theology.² In this perspective, according to him, liberation theology is "self- consciously contextual".³ This means that in spite of certain characteristics which are shared in common by the various forms of liberation theology, there is need to understand specific liberation theologies in terms of their respective particular contexts. In its most popular form, liberation theology is a relatively new theological perspective which began in Latin America between the late 1960s and early 1970s. Significantly, Charles Villa- Vicencio observes that the 1960s were years of revolutionary action in Europe, North America, South Africa and so forth. This clearly reveals that the birth of liberation theology in Latin America in the late 1960s and early 1970s was just a part of the revolutionary outburst which marked out the spirit of that age. In his own words, Latin American liberation theology "formed part of the revolutionary milieu that swept South and Central America during this time".⁴

The driving force behind this theology, as noted by Christopher Rowland in his *Radical Christianity: a Reading of Discovery*, is a combination of two factors, namely, "the quest for social justice for the poor and the participation of apparently insignificant ordinary people". The emergence of liberation theology is usually associated with some developments in Roman Catholic theology

since the Second Vatican Council which led to the decision taken by the Latin American bishops at their Episcopal conference at Medellin in 1968 to “take a ‘preferential option for the poor’.” This decision was eventually reaffirmed at the ensuing Puebla Conference in 1979.⁶ It is this decision that forms the foundation for the rise of liberation theology. The importance of these two Episcopal conferences to the formation and formulation of liberation theology cannot be overemphasized. They gave formative expression to Latin American liberation theology.⁷ Similarly, Rowland points out that:

There can be little doubt that these decisions have been of central importance for the emergence of the theology of liberation in the Churches of Latin America and for its ongoing influence on mainstream Catholicism and increasingly on the smaller protestant churches in Latin America. They have offered a foundation within the Episcopal teaching of the church, based ultimately on the Second Vatican Council and the encyclicals associated with it.⁸

One major outstanding feature of liberation theology which distinguishes it from other radical theological perspectives is its conviction that Christianity and its basic symbols must be reinterpreted from the perspective of the poor and oppressed in the light of the popular struggles for social justice. These forms the background for its hermeneutical principles, models and methodology.⁹ This conviction derives from the belief held by liberation theologians that the poor and marginalized enjoy a hermeneutical privilege which overshadows the perspectives of academic and ecclesiastical theologians. They claim, as Rowland puts it, that:

the vantage point is particularly, and especially, the vantage point of the crucified God and acts as a criterion for theological reflection, biblical exegesis, and the life of the Church. The poor are the means whereby the Church can learn to discern the truth, direction and content of its mission, and they can assure the Church of being where the Lord is to be found.¹⁰

He reflects this conviction in an exposition of Matthew 11:25, where Jesus says: “I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes” (KJV). Based on this text, he argues that “Oppressed persons have become the particular means whereby the divine perspective on human existence is offered. They are the ‘little ones’ who are vouchsafed a peculiar insight into the identity of the divine wisdom”¹¹. It is in this sense that he describes liberation as “a theology which, above all, often starts from the insights of those men and women who have found themselves caught up in the midst of that struggle, rather than being evolved and handed down to them by ecclesiastical or theological experts”.¹²

Closely and inseparably linked with this emphasis on the perspective of the poor in theological reflection, the liberationist hermeneutical approach is also characterized by its insistence on the important place to be given to actual experience and specific context in theological reflection. This is what they refer to as ‘contextualization.’ Of equal importance to liberation theology is its emphasis on praxis or social action in commitment to the poor and the marginalized. In their view, such commitment, rather than the academic approach of detached and speculative theologizing, is “the determining moment for theology”.¹³ This is its most serious point of departure from popular/ conventional theology. As Rowland maintains in the same work,

“Liberation theology is not the accumulation of, or learning about, a distinctive body of distinctive information...”.¹⁴ Rather:

The commitment to, and solidarity with, the poor and vulnerable are the necessary environment for stimulating the intellectual activity which enables liberation theology to begin. The key thing is that one first of all *does* liberation theology rather than learn about it. Or, to put it another way, one can only learn about it by embarking on it. To ask the question, ‘What is liberation?’ and think one can answer without commitment and the understanding which emerges from it is to miss out on the central ingredient of liberation theology. This experience cannot adequately be communicated except by committing oneself and taking the first step along the road of solidarity and action. Therein lies the root of understanding.¹⁵

It is in the light of this emphasis on commitment to the poor as the primary and essential context of theological reflection that he opines that we should see liberation theology rather as a new way of doing theology than a new theology in itself.¹⁶ It is also in this context of commitment to socio-political action on behalf of the poor and oppressed that Gustavo Gutierrez defines liberation theology as a “critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word”.¹⁷ This definition, as Villa-Vicencio aptly notes, shows liberation theology as both “poignantly Marxian” and also “grounded in biblical hermeneutics”.¹⁸ In keeping with this double polarity, Enrique Dussel describes it as a “Christian praxis and faith” which is both political and “fundamentally spiritual and pastoral”.¹⁹ For him, liberation theology can only be properly and adequately analyzed and understood in terms of “the fact that Christians were becoming involved in politics in order to fight injustice, together with the social teaching of the church”.²⁰ The hermeneutical peculiarity of liberation theology springs up from its paradoxical spirituality which combines Marxism with the Bible thereby interpreting Christian faith in terms of socio-political contexts and commitment in preference for the poor and marginalized. For liberation theologians, therefore, contemporary theology needs to take “the mystical – political form”.²¹

In this paper, we shall concern ourselves with examining how this unique hermeneutical perspective of liberation theology is reflected in its christological, hamatological and soteriological conceptions and formulations (that is, its views on Christ, sin and salvation, respectively).

CHRISTOLOGY

In similar terms as traditional Christology, liberation theologians see Jesus as the Messiah, the Word made flesh, the Incarnate God, and so forth. This understanding is either explicitly stated or implicitly assumed in their various works. However, rather than being concerned with abstract reflections on these themes, they repeatedly emphasize their major concern with relating Christological doctrines to concrete historical realities which demonstrate the socio-political implications of these themes for the liberation struggle. Following from their characteristic preoccupation with socio-political relevance, liberation theologians see the traditional theological reflection on abstract christological questions as being a misguided reduction of Christ to “sublime abstraction” and an obscuring of the figure of Jesus, which leads “to a spiritual conception of the Son

of God divorced from Jesus' concrete historicity".²² According to Jon Sobrino, traditional Christology leads to "the charismatic's invocation of the Spirit of Christ which does not look to the concrete historical reality of Jesus for inspiration".²³ This abstract christological absolutism, according to them, leads to a view of Jesus as a pacifist and to a use of Christianity as a support for ideologies that advocate passivity and unquestioning acceptance of the social and political status quo. In the light of these objections to the traditional christological approach, liberation theology offers a profoundly different christological perspective which insists that the historical Jesus rather than the Christ of faith should be made the starting point of christological reflection. Gustavo Gutierrez, for example, is quoted by Shorbok as urging that Jesus be viewed historically. According to him: "To approach the man, Jesus of Nazareth, in whom God was made flesh, to penetrate not only in his teaching, but also in his life, what it is that gives his word an immediate, concrete context, is a task which more and more needs to be undertaken."²⁴

Following this perspective, we notice then that the Christology of liberation theology stresses the historical Jesus as the authentic and pragmatic clarification of the chief elements of christological faith. One reason for this is that liberation theologians see a socio-political-structural similarity between the situations in Jesus' time which He addressed and those of the contemporary world, particularly in the Third World. Oppression and domination, which are contrary to the divine plan for mankind, characterize the contemporary society just as the first century Palestine. In this case, Jesus is seen as a liberator who in the Gospels initiated a programme of liberation. His struggle against the Jewish authorities illustrates the model conflict that any project of liberation will inevitably provoke (Shorbok 82). As L. Boff explains: "Jesus does not present himself as the explanation of reality; he presents himself as the urgent demand for the transformation of that reality.... By offering a critique of humanity and society, Jesus points the way to the fulfillment of the kingdom of God" (279, 230). In particular, Jesus is viewed as following in the liberation tradition and footsteps of the great prophets of ancient Israel. Prophecy in the Old Testament and Jesus' mission in the New Testament, as I. Ellacuria insists, must be related. He is quoted by Shorbok as saying that:

The prophecy of the Old Testament takes on its full ascendant import only in terms of what Jesus himself represents. By the same token the meaning of Jesus himself would escape us if we disregarded the history of prophecy (82- 83).

David Tracy relates the implication of the image of Jesus as a prophet for the liberation project and insists that any theology that lacks this prophetic form is no longer truly Christian. According to him,

The prophet speaks not because he or she wishes to but because God as Other demands it. The prophet speaks on behalf of the other- the neighbor – especially the poor, the oppressed, and the marginal other. Jesus is the eschatological prophet bespeaking the Other for the sake of all others. There is no way around the prophetic core of Christian self- understanding. Even our earliest Christologies come in prophetic form. Not only the liberation and evangelical theologies but all serious Christian theology must maintain that prophetic form or admit that its transformation into some reality has become something perhaps rich and strange but no longer Christian, that is, prophetic (232).

As a liberator, Jesus is said to identify himself more with the oppressed in their predicaments. This claim receives Paul Lakeland's endorsement when he points to Jesus' indisputable sensitivity to the social sins of Palestine where the oppression of the poor and the creation of a sub-culture of defeat and marginalization were "institutionalised by a religiously-buttressed world-view" (374). He maintains that Jesus' response to the religious structure and, more especially, His exemplary attitude of care, compassion and service done out of love, were socio-political in effect, though religiously motivated. These, according to him, were the root-cause of His being brought to Calvary (374- 375). James H. Cone also validates this liberating interpretation of Christology by asserting that:

If the gospel is a gospel of liberation for the oppressed, then Jesus is where the oppressed are and continues his work of liberation there. Jesus is not safely confined in the first century. He is our contemporary, proclaiming release to the captives and rebelling against all who silently accept the structures of injustice... (120-121).

Cone's christological views are aptly expressed in his *Black Theology and Black Power*. From this work, it is obvious that there is a negative aspect as well as a positive aspect to Cone's Christology. On a negative note, Cone describes Christ's work in history in terms of conflict. According to him, the Gospels present Christ as waging a protracted battle against the forces of evil as He healed the sick, exorcized demons and denounced the corrupt religious authorities of His time (qtd in Antonio 81). The characteristic features and symbols of Christ's "conflict- ridden campaign", according to Cone, were the temptation that attended the beginning of His ministry and the Cross that ultimately brought it to a close (40 qtd in Antonio 81). On the positive aspects of Cone's Christology, he refers to Christ's victory over death as a symbol of victory over all evils. As Antonio tries to clarify:

If, however, the cross is the ultimate symbol of conflict, pain and death, the latter has no final hold on Christ. The death which he died did not mark the end of God's involvement with humanity, it did not spell the end of his redemptive project. That is why Easter exists. The resurrection acts...as the living proof of the enactment of the presence of God in Jesus Christ: it is that which discloses the moment of victory over death (81).

From both the negative and positive aspects of Cone's Christology, it is obvious, as Antonio points out, that he uses the language of liberation to describe the essence of Christ's work. These two aspects, conflict and liberation, in the ministry of Jesus Christ, follow from Cone's view that the image of Christ as the 'Oppressed One' has precedence over all other historical images of His in the New Testament. In his *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone maintains that Christ's identification with the poor was the epicenter or pivot of His whole life and work as well as "the distinctive historical kernel in the gospels" (202, 203 quoted in Antonio 81). In Cone's own words:

The finality of Jesus lies in the totality of his existence in complete freedom as the Oppressed One, who reveals through his death and resurrection that God himself is present in all dimensions of human liberation. His death is the revelation of freedom of God, taking upon himself the totality of human oppression; his resurrection is the

disclosure that God is not defeated by oppression but transforms it into the possibility for freedom (210 qtd in Antonio 81).

This radical interpretation of the Cross of Christ in socio- political terms is equally reflected in the Christologies of Jurgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino. Jurgen Moltmann interprets the Cross in such a way that brings out its socio- political implications for the liberation struggle. Moltmann rejects every interpretation of the Cross as depicting resignation, indifference to historical processes or surrender to circumstances. He tries to locate a political factor in the crucifixion of Christ, since He was officially executed by the Roman imperial power. In summary, four things are maintained in his thinking: first, that: Jesus' message attacked every state's claim to absolute loyalty; second, that He was therefore functionally seditious; third, that His crucifixion was the institutional repression of a revolutionary challenge to the status quo's claims to be absolute; and fourth, that the cross was therefore the initial rejection by the Church of all political structures seeking a religious legitimization and sacralization (12). In this perspective, Jesus Christ is most of all seen by liberation theologians as 'a rebel who was oppressed and then killed by the evil imperialists' (Anonymous "...the Pope and Marxism" 1). The anonymous author of the online article "Liberation Theology, the Pope and Marxism" refers to a ludicrous interpretation and application of the crucifixion of Jesus by a Brazilian liberation theologian to mean that "all of Brazil – every man , woman and child – is being crucified daily by the social injustices inherent to an evil capitalist society" (1).

The Christology of liberation theology reveals another aspect of the Cross as a symbol of hope and triumph in the midst of, and over, hopelessness. Sobrino elaborately deals with what he calls "Jesus' sense of his abandonment by God, his father, and yet his willingness to trust in that God who has apparently abandoned him, to hope against hope" (84ff). In this case, Christology is shown as dealing with the problem of evil, as represented by oppression and suffering in society, by providing a kind of theodicy for the oppressed. Lakeland summarizes Sobrino's thought thus:

On the cross, Jesus is without any control, without any power, placed there by the will of the father who seems to have deserted him... And faith today is the conviction that following in this path is the way to resurrection... This 'way' for the oppressed of the world, for those who are not only hungry and hungry for justice, but are getting hungrier, can only be a hoping against hope, a belief in a God and Church which must so often seem not to care. The way of the cross may be their one chance to avoid hopelessness (376).

It is in the very context of Jesus' identification with the poor and oppressed as the 'Oppressed One' that Cone's famous claim that Jesus is black is being made. As Edward Antonio explains, although Cone's christological view ends with the understanding of Jesus in terms of the symbol of blackness, we are not to read a literal sense into this claim. According to him,

We must be careful to note here that Cone is not claiming that Jesus was biologically black...rather his point seems to be that the experience which characterized his (Jesus') life, being born a Jew, of an oppressed and despised people, and into an insignificant family, as well as his suffering at the hands of both the religious and political authorities, are capable of being apprehended through blackness today. Hence, when Cone declares, as he frequently does, that

Christ is black, it is the idea of Christ's identification with the suffering of blacks caused by racism which is in the foreground, and not primarily the racial category of blackness (83).

A significant implication of this interpretation of Cone's christological view of Jesus' blackness as the 'Oppressed One' is the possibility of its contextual mobility or mutability. This is reflected in Antonio's further conclusion:

To sum up, Christology cannot be reconstructed without regard for the historical specificity of Jesus' humanity; without regard for the social context which establishes his racial identity and thus identification with those who are negated because of their own racial identities. But, in turn, the Christological importance of Jesus' humanity can itself not be properly construed except within the context of the kerygma of liberation (83).

From this point of contextual mutability of Christ's identification with the oppressed as the 'Oppressed One', we can understand the variation in the christological perspective of other forms of liberation theology such as the feminist and womanist theologies which interpret the humanity of Christ in the light of the gender context of oppression rather than the racial context which black theology grapples with or the politico- economic context of Latin American liberation theology. In relation to this, Mary Grey writes:

Unsurprisingly, there has been much attention to the meaning of the person of Christ. Feminist theology stresses the fundamental importance of the incarnation of God in Christ as *human*, rather than Christ as male, although it has to be said that the maleness of Christ does not present the same problem for womanist theology, where the symbolic force of Jesus as *suffering brother in the struggle*, regardless of his gender, is a more empowering symbol (97).

HARMATIOLOGY (THE CONCEPT OF SIN)

Harmatiology in systematic theology refers to the biblical doctrine of sin. Liberation theology looks at sin essentially in its collective, institutional and structural perspective rather than in a mere individual sense. The traditional Christian theological notion of sin which emphasizes the dimensions of individual transgression of the law and of the inner life of the sinner is rejected as unbiblical. On the contrary, liberation theologians point out: that the Bible repeatedly demonstrates the concept of sin as more than inward rebellion of man. They maintain that sin manifests itself in the collective behaviour of groups, classes, and nations; and thus, that unrighteousness is rooted in institutions and social structures. In keeping with this perspective, they point to the vehement attack on the evil structures of Assyria and Babylon and on the unrighteousness of Judah and Israel as nations by the prophets of Israel. Based on this conviction, Johannes Verkuyl and H. G. Nordholt Schulte call all theologians to the realization of the socio-structural dimension of their harmatiological understanding and interpretation. They argue that "Humanists have seen, better than pietistic Christianity, the depths of sin in the structures of feudalism, slavery, colonialism and imperialism" (40). Thus sin from the perspective of liberation theology, "is not a personal issue, but an economic and social condition" (Anonymous "...the Pope and Marxism" 1). As the anonymous contributor of the online article "Liberation Theology" puts it, "[Liberation] Theologians began to preach that sin was manifested in the unjust structures of one class of people

dominating over a lower class”(1). As this author puts it, liberation theologians view the sinfulness of man’s plight in a ghetto as being more important than sin in man’s heart (1). From this perspective, therefore, sin is defined simply in terms of man’s inhumanity to man rather than in terms of rebellion against God or transgression of His laws (Webster quoted in Believe 5). Leonardo Boff, in his meditation on the Lord’s Prayer, defines ‘the evil one’ as the one “embodied in an elitist, exclusivist social system that has no solidarity with the multitudes of the poor. He has a name; he is the Capitalism of private property and the Capitalism of State” (119 qtd in Villa – Vicencio 158).

Another hermeneutical perspective of liberation theology is that which identifies sin with the attitude of indifference in the midst of oppression and injustice. This view seems to be ‘the child of Harvey Cox’s brain’ and ‘the product of his inventive genius’. Harvey Cox describes sin as “man’s betrayal of his manhood” (129). He sees apathy, indifference or sloth as the essence of sin. “Law-abiding complacency and inactivity”, according to him, constitute a deadly sin because they conceal “criminal sinfulness” and act as “source-sin” – a kind of “structural derangement” from which other sins arise. Such docility is to him “a determined or lackadaisical refusal to live up to one’s essential humanity” (129). It makes men shrink from the energy required in effective political action. Thus, “The apathetic avoidance of politics is the sophisticated way in which we, like Cain, club our brother to death” (129- 130). The same concept of sin is reflected in David H. Kelsey’s attempt to balance up between the socio – structural and individual dimensions of sin in the hermeneutical concept of liberation theology. In liberation theology, according to him,

... sin is understood basically to be unjust societal self – contradiction, in contrast to sin as the self – contradictory state of human subjects. Hence sin is at once socially structural ...and individual....It is structural in that it is an inherited and shared arrangement of power in society that oppresses some, putting them in conflict with others, in which we continue to be complicit whether as oppressed or oppressing. It is individual insofar as, knowing of God’s acts to liberate us all from it, we nonetheless willfully refuse to oppose it... But refusal to respond in trust to God’s act of liberation with our own inadequate efforts to liberate the oppressed and to correct unjust structural arrangements of power is against God and is sin (243).

SOTERIOLOGY

Soteriology is the aspect of systematic theology which deals with the doctrine of salvation. Liberation theologians have developed a new and radical hermeneutical perspective from which salvation is interpreted, in the light of the condition of the oppressed and deprived people of the world, to mean “that which would save mankind from every thing that dehumanizes people and would restore us all to the dignity of our full humanity”, which is “made in the image of Christ” (Webb 65). They reject the concept of salvation as a private passport to heaven which has no earthly value. Hence, to proclaim the Gospel of salvation, for them, means joining in the battle against the destructive forces in the world. These forces, for them, include, not just the evils within a person’s own heart, but also the principalities and powers of evil which dominate and infect the very fabric of all human institutions (Webb 65). Pauline Webb presents a revolutionary exegesis of the story of how the baby Moses was saved to become the saviour of God’s people - through the “effective civil disobedience and resistance” of his mother and sister. From this, she asserts that salvation is not only an inward spiritual

experience, but “effective action for others”. She further maintains that although justice is not the means of salvation, it is, nevertheless, the effect of it. According to her, all forms of social evils could be removed by good will and sacrificial endeavour. Based on this conviction, she concludes therefore that to speak easy words about Christian salvation while at the same time we are not doing everything in our power to remove social wrongs, wherever in the world they are found, is little short of blasphemous (Webb 66). In the same light, Gutierrez explains salvation with reference to salvation from the Egyptian bondage and slavery – a liberation which, according to him, is a political act and “the beginnings of the construction of a just and fraternal society” (qtd in Benavides 126). He equates the Bible notion of salvation, therefore, with the process of liberation from oppression and injustice. Austin Cline makes similar observations on Gutierrez’s identification of liberation with salvation as the same thing in his theological system. He analyzes Gutierrez’s soteriological conception by citing him as follows:

The first step towards salvation is the transformation of society: The poor must be freed from economic, political, and social oppression...The second step towards salvation is the transformation of the self: we must begin to exist as active agents rather than passively accepting the conditions of oppression and exploitation that surround us. The third and final step is the transformation of our relationship with God – specifically, the liberation from sin (qtd in Anonymous. “Fighting Poverty...”1).

Thus, apart from seeking to demonstrate that the distinction between spiritual salvation and political liberation is untenable, Gutierrez equally gives preeminence and priority to political liberation. Spiritual salvation, that is, salvation from sin, thereby becomes only secondary and subservient.

In this connection, Alfred T. Hennelly quotes Juan Landazuri Ricketts, the Cardinal Archbishop of Lima as emphasizing that “in Latin America, salvation, which is the realization of the Kingdom of God, involves the liberation of all men, the progress of each and all from a less human condition to one more human” (Hennelly10). This view of salvation, Hennelly notes, is echoed in the final statement of the Medellin conference when the bishops referred to the era of liberation theology as “a new epoch in their history”. This new era is for them “a time of zeal for full emancipation, of liberation from every form of servitude, of personal maturity and of collective integration” (10). To usher in or celebrate this salvific era, they forthrightly denounced the international monopolies, imperialism and institutionalized violence of Capitalism common in their countries. In their breathtaking conclusion, they ruled that such a situation demands a bold, urgent and profoundly renovating global transformation (Hennelly 10). Drawing from such a soteriological stance, Hennelly concludes that the thesis of liberation theology can be summarized as: “a call to the church ... to become ... a sacrament of salvation for all mankind” (4). In Latin America, according to him, this clearly entails being “the visible sign of the presence of the Lord within the aspiration for liberation and the struggle for a more human and just society” (4).

Following this soteriological perspective, liberation theology explains the concept of conversion in a socio-structural sense. It is maintained that the Bible does not confine the word ‘conversion’ to the inner psychic life of individual persons or to a radical change in personal relations with other individuals, as evangelical theology does. The Bible, in their view, also uses the term in reference to nations and societies, calling peoples and whole structures to conversion. In this way, a connection is made to exist between personal and structural conversion. On this ground, Gutierrez argues that conversion is not a withdrawn and pious

attitude, rather: “Our conversion process is affected by the socio-economic, political, cultural, and human environment in which it occurs. Without a change in these structures, there is no authentic conversion” (96, 97). In summary, it can be affirmed therefore, that liberation theology’s soteriology de-emphasizes the psychology of salvation and emphasizes the sociology of salvation. In other words, it is a sociological soteriology as against a psychological soteriology.

Kelsey maintains a divergent opinion from the concept of salvation which equates God’s redemption plan with political liberation of the oppressed. He acknowledges as sin the refusal to work along with God in His act of liberation by joining hands to liberate the oppressed and to correct oppressive power structures. He, nevertheless, argues that:

Human movements to liberate the oppressed do not bring in God’s liberation; only God does that. Redemption as the enactment of God’s plan for the world may not be conflated with progressive social action as the enactment of some critical social theory (243).

CONCLUSION

Before bringing this discourse to a close, a brief critical appraisal of the hermeneutical approach of liberation theology based on its Christology, hamatiology and soteriology is necessary.

On a positive note, the humanistic and humanitarian zest underlying the unconventional and radical hermeneutics of liberation theology should be recognized and appreciated. Its compassion for the poor and oppressed and its conviction that passivity and indifference to their plight is unbecoming of true Christianity are quite commendable as its major strength. We would all agree with the fact that man’s inhumanity to man is a heinous sin that deserves God’s judgment and Christian resistance. Webster is correct in this sense when he describes liberation theology as “a plea for costly discipleship and a reminder that to follow Jesus (sic) has practical social and political consequences”(qtd in Believe 5). In fairness, we are bound to appreciate the hermeneutical approach of liberation theology as representing the concern for human beings and their doubly spiritual and material impoverishment. In view of the global cries of protest and the clamour for a better world that this condition has prompted, liberation theology represents a simple response to injustice and a demand that prompt and positive attention be paid to this basic human need. The common thread that runs through and unifies all ramifications of its hermeneutics and exegesis is the conviction that faith must be primarily concerned with *doing* something rather than merely speculating about it (Rowland, *Radial Christianity* 161). In view of this, Rowland calls us to understand the struggle against injustice which influences liberation theologians. He argues that such should remain at the heart of those committed to the good news of Jesus Christ. This, as he insists, must imply the need to embark on a course of action to remedy the situation of injustice, however inadequate such course of action may seem (161).

While appreciating the humanistic and humanitarian motivations of liberation theology’s hermeneutical approach, it should be recognized that good and sincere motivations do not justify a wrong methodology. The popular maxim that the end justifies the means is not biblical. Apostle Paul affirms that we are not to do evil that good may come (Rom. 3:8).

One major weakness that has been widely associated with the hermeneutics of liberation theology is its deviation from fundamental beliefs of historic Christian faith and what D. D. Webster describes as “an application of misleading hermeneutical principles” (qtd in Believe 5). The corollary of this is its much closer inclination to and orientation towards Marxism than Christianity. This attitude affects every aspect of the liberationist hermeneutics. It has been remarked that while liberation theology began initially as a determination to implement the social implications of the Gospel for Latin America, it soon degenerated into the belief that the best way to express Christian love towards suffering neighbors is through political revolution. This later led its proponents to the conclusion that radical Marxist revolutionary movements are God’s instrument to establish His kingdom of peace, justice, equity and prosperity for Latin America and, by extension, for all suffering people (Anonymous “...the Pope and Marxism” 1). This degeneration is a fundamental fault that is reflected in its approach to the three theological themes under discussion.

The Christological conception of liberation theology reveals that the importance of Jesus for it lies in His exemplary struggle for the poor and the outcasts, not in His divinity and not even in His redemptive death. Liberation theologians see Jesus’ teaching and action as only demonstrating the love of God (on behalf of the kingdom of God) in a historical situation that is strikingly similar to the Latin American context or that of any other third world country. For them, Jesus’ incarnation can only be meaningful in terms of “his total immersion in a historical situation of conflict and oppression” (quoted in Believe 4). According to them:

The uniqueness of Jesus’ cross lies not in the fact that God, at a particular point in space and time, experienced the suffering intrinsic to man’s sinfulness in order to provide a way of redemption. Jesus’ death is not a vicarious offering on behalf of mankind who deserves God’s wrath. Jesus’ death is unique because he historicizes in exemplary fashion all the crosses of the oppressed. Liberation theology holds that through Jesus’ life people are brought into the liberating conviction that God does not remain outside of history indifferent to the present course of evil events but that he reveals himself through the authentic medium of the poor and oppressed (Webster qtd in Believe 4).

The possibility and pragmatic utility of highlighting the political implications of Jesus’ life and death for the poor and oppressed in their struggle for liberation are both indisputable and admirable. However, to reduce the redemptive mission of Christ to mere political concern for the poor and oppressed, and to deny the vicariousness of His death or to replace it with mere identification with the plight of the poor and oppressed would not only be a gross over-simplification, but it sounds blasphemous and anti-Christian. This would also mean that Jesus’ incarnation and death on the cross was only for the benefit of the poor and the oppressed. The rich and oppressors would have no part or share in His salvific event. We would agree with Webster here again that “A theology of the cross which isolates Jesus’ death from its particular place in God’s design and shuns the disclosure of its revealed meaning is powerless to bring us to God, hence assuring the perpetuity of our theological abandonment” (quoted in Believe 5).

Of equal seriousness is the emphasis of liberation theology on the Kingdom of God which understands it basically in terms of its enactment in history and with reference to its political implication

for the liberation of the oppressed in the here and now. One wonders how liberation theologians would interpret Jesus' rejection of the plan by the Jews to make Him a king (John 6:14, 15) and His response to Pilate that His kingdom is not of this world and therefore, is not to be established through violent struggle (John 18:36). Liberation theologians seem to have fallen into the same error and delusion of the Jews of Jesus' day who despised and eventually forfeited the salvific mission of Jesus because of their political ambitions, pre-occupation and expectations. Matthew, in his Gospel, makes the salvific mission of Jesus clear thus: "And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shall call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sin" (Matthew 1:21 KJV), not primarily from their socio-political oppression. While they were engrossed in their expectation of a political Messiah - a warrior or military hero who would lead them in a military expedition against Rome to overthrow it, they eventually missed both the available spiritual and the anticipated political emancipation. The right emphasis on Jesus' soul-saving role in the life of the individual seems to offer more hope for the attainment of the structural liberation option advocated for by liberation theology. It is only when the people that make up the society - both the oppressors and oppressed - are saved or converted from their evil, selfish and wicked nature, we can then hope for a transformed, just and equitable society.

There is also a serious theological problem with the harmatological emphasis of liberation theology. This is with its view of sin as part of bad social structures which de-emphasizes personal sin. Liberation theologians hold that sin or injustice, which they take to be synonymous, is not due to individual error but collective systematic problems in economic order of the world (Franchuk 3). Liberation theologians may not actually overlook the sinfulness of man completely, but when personal sin is acknowledged at all, they maintain that it exists because of oppressive political and social structures. In place of the Christian doctrine of the inbred sin or adamic nature which is conceived as the root of all sins in the heart of man, liberation theology identifies Capitalism as the source - evil or the root of all sins. In this connection, Kerry Franchuk quotes a 1973 pastoral letter of Brazilian bishops of the Amazon region as claiming thus: "We must overcome capitalism. It is the greatest evil, the rotten root, the tree that produces those fruits we all know: poverty, hunger, sickness, and death of the majority. The vast majority work to enrich the few" (4).

It is obvious from this position then, that the liberationists ignore the words of Jesus that: "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts...all these evil things come from within and defile the man" (Mark 7: 20 - 23 KJV). It is clear, therefore, that in contradiction to Jesus' teaching that man is born with evil propensities toward iniquity, liberation theologians say that sin is the result of a social and political system. They seem to understand sin basically in terms of social alienation. Therefore, in dealing with the problem of sin, they think that the primary goal of theology is the overthrow of the oppressive structures (Martin 3).

There is nothing wrong in the effort of liberation theologians to expose the reality of oppression in society and the existence of the two classes of oppressors and oppressed. To give this social classification "an almost ontological status" as they do, however, is more akin to Marxism than Christianity. For Christians, sin as alienation from God is a predicament which confronts the oppressor as well as the oppressed. But the manner in which liberation theology lays emphasis on the poor leaves one with the impression that the poor are the exclusive object of God's concern, the exclusive subject of God's salvation and revelation and that the cry of the oppressed alone represents the voice of God. That the Bible often speaks of God being for the poor should not imply that the poor are to be taken as the actual embodiment of God in the world today. By implying this, liberation theology, as Webster

notes, “threatens to politicize the gospel to the point that the poor are offered a solution that could be provided with or without Jesus Christ” (quoted in Believe 5).

To evaluate the soteriological concept of liberation theology, one may need to recall the concept of salvation according to the Bible which relates both to man’s life in the world and to his eternal destiny. Since liberation theology understands sin basically in terms of social alienation, it also understands salvation as by and through political action alone. Gutierrez defines salvation only in terms of “building the new society” and conversion in terms of “commitment to the political task of humanizing life on earth” (quoted in Martin 2 – 3).

Evaluating the soteriological perspective of liberation theology, the anonymous author of the online article, “Liberation Theology” maintains that:

Liberation theology is the perfect substitute for true Christianity. It replaces the traditional message of salvation based on faith in Jesus’ death with one that is focused on salvation through political and social reform. Salvation is simply reduced to the goal of freedom from oppression in this life. Liberation theology allows the Gospel of Christ to be swallowed up by socialism, God is seen as a “hidden force”, and the New Testament is merely a collection of useful illustrations of Marxist truths (1).

The author goes on to maintain that advocates of the liberation movement

... ignore man’s spiritual needs and concentrate on bettering mankind’s physical condition.... People are taught to look for an earthly savior who will deliver man from earthly slavery rather than for a Savior who saves man from spiritual bondage (1 – 2).

Furthermore, liberation theologians lay more emphasis on human involvement in the liberation struggle to bring salvation. This emphasis betrays the theological imbalance of the liberationists. In contradiction to this imbalanced position, Kelsey tries to strike a balance between the divine and human activities in the salvific process. According to him:

Human movements to liberate the oppressed do not bring in God’s liberation, only God does that. Redemption as the enactment of God’s plan for the world may not be conflated with progressive social theory. But refusal to respond in trust to God’s act of liberation with our own inadequate efforts to liberate the oppressed and to correct unjust structural arrangements of power is against God and is sin (243).

Related to its political understanding of salvation, liberation theology also defines salvation in collective terms in such a way that virtually excludes individual redemption. As a result, liberation theologians frown at the use of the phrase ‘accepting Christ as personal Saviour’ (Martin 3). Following this structural or collective concept of salvation, the liberationist soteriology accuses traditional theology of the tendency to stress personal salvation without equally emphasizing the need for the salvation of institutions. They argue that we need the corporate strength of the church community to resist the world’s powerful institutions. In this sense, salvation to the liberationists is man’s effort to free himself from political, economic, racial and social oppression (Martin 3). Contrary to this collective or structural view of salvation, Christians down through the years have, traditionally speaking, strongly rejected as

unbiblical any interpretation of salvation which seem to obscure man's need to be saved from sin through faith in the atoning blood of Jesus (Martin 3).

From all indications it is quite obvious that liberation theology's mission is to speak to the temporal problems of this present life with no regard for the spiritual issues of the future eternal life. It is on this basis that members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission have criticized it for its concentration on narrative and prophetic texts which highlight situations of oppression and situations that inspire a praxis leading to social change. They admit that exegesis cannot be neutral, but equally foresee a danger that 'those engaged in liberation theology might be too one-sided, and find themselves engaged in social and political action which is not the main task of the exegete' (qtd in Rowland. "Introduction" 9). They also question the authority of their use of Marxist analysis of social reality as a frame of reference for reading the Bible (9).

From our evaluation, it appears conclusive, in agreement with the anonymous author of "Liberation Theology: the Pope and Marxism", that liberation theology has very little theology because it has little to do with traditional Christian doctrines or Christianity itself and very much to do with Marxist hermeneutics and dialectics (1). In the same vein, Pope John Paul II refers to liberation theologians as "'political priests' who become more involved with achieving social justice than ministering to their flocks' (qtd in Anonymous. "Fighting Poverty..."1).

ENDNOTES

¹"Theology". *The Encyclopedia Americana*. Vol. 26. (Danbury: Grolier Incorporated, 1997), 633.

²Charles Villa- Vicencio, "Liberation and Reconstruction: the Unfinished Agenda" in Christopher Rowland. ed. *Liberation Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 153.

³*Ibid.*, 153.

⁴*Ibid.*, 153.

⁵Christopher Rowland, *Radical Christianity: a Reading of Recovery*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988, 115.

⁶*Ibid.*, 115.

⁷Charles Villa- Vicencio, *op. cit.*, 153.

⁸Christopher Rowland, *Radical Christianity op cit.*, 115-116.

⁹"Theology". *The Encyclopedia Americana op cit.*, 633.

¹⁰Christopher Rowland "Introduction: the Theology of Liberation" in Christopher Rowland. ed.

Liberation Theology. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 7.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹²*Ibid.*, 3.

¹³*Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷Gustavo. Gutierrez, “A Spirituality of Liberation.” in Alistair Kee ed., *A Reader in Political Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 13.

¹⁸Charles Villa- Vicencio, *op. cit.* 155.

¹⁹Enrique Dussel, “Theology of Liberation and Marxism”. In Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino. eds. *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Mary Knoll, N,Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 221- 231.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 221-231.

²¹Quoted in David. Tracy, “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity” in Robin Gill. Ed. *Readings in Modern Theology* (London: SPCK, 1995), 232.

²²Dan Cohn Sherbok, “Jesus the Jew and Liberation Theology”. *The Month*. Vol. CCLXVI, No. 1398. (March, 1984), 82.

²³Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (New York: SCM Press, 1980), xvi.

²⁴Dan Cohn Sherbok, *op cit*, 82.

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