

# The Political Theory of Liberation Theology

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Liberation theology is often presented as a synthesis of Marxist social theory and Christian exegesis. This essay will argue that it is more accurate to see liberation theology as a response to the crisis of modernity. Like Marxism and the Catholic Church's Vatican II reforms, liberation theology responds to the anthropocentric reorientation of philosophy and human affairs that had begun in the eighteenth century and reached its zenith in the twentieth.<sup>1</sup> While liberation theology shares much with the Marxist critique, these shared elements are best understood as parallel responses to the unique challenges posed by the modern condition. This view of liberation theology as a response to a uniquely modern problem also diverges sharply from the self-assessment of central figures in the liberation theology movement, who claim to be recovering the spirit and practices of the early Christian church. In this essay, I argue that liberation theology is neither explicitly Marxist nor a return to the practices of the early Church. Instead, I claim that it is a characteristically modern response to the fundamental problem of a humanistic moral order.

While many theologians are prominent in 20<sup>th</sup> century liberation theology, I will here rely on the work of Gustavo Gutierrez and Juan Luis Segundo to give a background on its content and theological commitments in the particular context of Catholicism as situated in Latin America. I will then examine the claim that Latin American liberation theology is a return to Christianity's roots. Evaluating this claim will require a discussion of the practices of the early Church, as well as the philosophical milieu in which early Christianity emerged. Next, I will

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<sup>1</sup> "Man is the measure of all things, since God became man" (Barth 1954).

examine the emergence of Latin American liberation theology as a reform movement within Catholicism, and contrast this with parallel developments in Iranian liberation theology and its role as a reform movement within Shi'a Islam. By means of this comparison, I hope to elucidate the process by which religious traditions are forced to respond to the secular philosophical developments characterizing particular eras, and I will argue that the scale of the ensuing transformation can be inadvertently magnified by a failure to anticipate and accommodate a changing world.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I will contrast the commitments of liberation theology with those of Marxism, showing that despite their distinctions, both movements can be characterized as responses to the modern condition.

In a sense, we can trace the growing role of the individual in the Catholic Church from at least the Reformation. Behind the vernacular bibles and the active congregations of sixteenth-century Protestant Europe lay the notion that a satisfying faith entailed more than passive participation in ritual and intercession, and required active individual involvement both in textual interpretation and in deciding the content and form of religious ritual. Over the ensuing centuries, the Roman Church reluctantly followed this inexorable trend toward popular involvement, and the reforms of the Second Vatican Council concretized a long process of change that brought the Church into greater alignment with public opinion regarding the centrality of the individual.

The intellectual transformations undergirding this change in attitudes are far beyond the present paper's scope. However, for our purposes it will be sufficient to note that as focus shifted from God to man, attention was inexorably drawn from the hereafter to the here-and-now. In a medieval church sternly committed to the inescapable damnation of the vast majority of mankind, present living conditions were seldom an object of much concern. By contrast, a

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<sup>2</sup> A corollary of this observation is that particular exegeses are ultimately in some sense functions of the contemporaneous philosophical landscape.

church committed to the importance of individuals must perforce commit to reducing their suffering. Thus the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) of 1962-1965 explicitly “focuse[d] its attention on the world of men” and stated that “human society deserves to be renewed” (*Gaudiam et Spes* 2-3). The prelates discerned that humankind has entered “a new stage of history,” characterized by “profound and rapid changes...triggered by the intelligence and creative energies of man” (4). Vatican II set in motion what John XIII called a process of “*aggiornamento*”, of bringing the church “up to date” (June 1961). The manifestations of this process included the reorientation of the celebrant toward the congregation, mass conducted in the vernacular, and even a modest reduction in the majesty of clerical regalia. These developments are traceable to what the Council called “the birth of a new humanism, one in which man is defined first of all by his responsibility to his brothers and to history” (*Gaudiam et Spes* 55).

### *Liberation Theology in Latin America*

In Latin America<sup>3</sup>, liberation theology emerged within the Catholic clergy, motivated by a visceral reaction against widespread poverty and social injustice. In the 1960s and early 1970s, these reactions were expressed in prominent works by Gustavo Gutierrez and Juan Luis Segundo, with later contributions by Jon Sobrino and Leonardo Boff, among others. At an episcopal conference held in Medellin in 1968, the Council of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) echoed the Vatican II emphasis on human agency, stating that “man himself is the one responsible and “the principal author of his success or failure” (*Populorum Progressio* #15).

However, CELAM gave these principles a particularly Latin-American interpretation, calling for

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<sup>3</sup> I must confess some misgivings about the term ‘Latin America’. On a recent journey across Campeche and Chiapas, I recall asking the people I met if they felt “latinoamericano”. They laughed at me, and told me they were Maya. The use of a European language family to label the descendants of a people systematically enslaved by Europeans rankles (compare the derogatory use of the Anglo-Saxon word for foreigner (“Welsh”) to characterize the original inhabitants of Britain). In the absence of a widely-accepted substitute, however, I will conform to prevailing usage. It is worth noting Gutierrez’s occasional use of the word “Indo-American” as a synonym for Latin America.

the clergy to reduce ties with the establishment to permit freer criticism of injustice and acknowledging the Church's relative material prosperity in the face of widespread poverty (Abalos 1969).

Underlying this transformation was a reinterpretation both of liberation and of theology. Gutierrez interpreted theology to be critical reflection, not on God but on human *praxis*. He argued that theology "must be man's critical reflection on himself" (Gutierrez 1973:11), leading to "a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed" (15). Similarly, he understood liberation to be both an internal and an external event, comprising physical liberation as well as liberation from ideology (30-31). Internal liberation so understood requires dissenting from a society's prevailing values, because these values are an expression of existing power structures.<sup>4</sup> Gutierrez explicitly invoked Marcuse's Great Refusal as the type of radical break that would be necessary to achieve internal liberation, which if achieved would produce "an individual in solidarity with all mankind" (33). Understood in this way, the theologian is a kind of guide, explaining the meaning of events and providing a framework within which this break from unjust structures can be made.<sup>5</sup>

Segundo similarly saw theology as fundamentally connected to practice, though he is more explicit than Gutierrez about the necessity of rooting that practice in partiality for a particular community (Segundo 29). Insisting that theology is necessarily ideological, Segundo criticized attempts to escape from bias and partiality as suffused with unconscious political commitments, and that as a result past theologians had unconsciously supported the powerful

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<sup>4</sup> "In order to achieve this non-repressive society, however, it will be necessary to challenge the values espoused by the society which denies human beings the possibility of living freely" (31). Compare Bourdieu's *La Distinction*.

<sup>5</sup> "But if theology is based on this observation of historical events and contributes to the discovery of their meaning, it is with the purpose of making Christians' commitment within them more radical and clear. Only with the exercise of the prophetic function understood in this way, will the theologian be—to borrow an expression from Antonio Gramsci—a new kind of "organic intellectual"" (Gutierrez 13).

against the weak (9). He applied the concept of a “hermeneutic circle” to theology, arguing that we can liberate our theology from its inherent conservatism and “false objectivity” only when we are sufficiently challenged by our circumstances to question our basic concepts and provoked by this questioning to a new exegetical understanding (39). So liberated, theology becomes a mechanism for provisionally instantiating political ideology (in the non-normative sense) through faith. Segundo held that while faith without works is dead, “[f]aith without ideologies is equally dead” (181) because it is only “faith incarnated in successive ideologies” that allow us to know God’s purpose in the world (129).<sup>6</sup>

Significantly, Gutierrez was explicit that injustice is wrong because it offends our moral intuitions, not because it violates textual proscriptions.<sup>7</sup> Injustice is a sin, not against God but against man. In this sense, as he wrote, “...the world has gradually been acknowledged as existing in its own right...the world has slowly asserted its secularity” (66). He took an existentialist view of religion’s metaphysical priority, arguing that “...rather than define the world in relation to the religious phenomenon, it would seem that religion should be redefined in relation to the profane” (67). This is clearly a new kind of theology, with a powerful focus on the present world. Gutierrez argued that “[w]e can no longer speak properly of a profane world, [because] salvation is not something otherworldly, in regard to which the present life is merely a test” (151).

On the basis of this humanistic reevaluation of mundane experience, Gutierrez was led to reassess the role of the Church, castigating it for its complicity in widespread poverty and injustice. He wrote that “[t]he majority of the Church has covertly or openly been an accomplice of the external and internal dependency of our peoples. It has sided with the dominant groups,

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<sup>6</sup> “...we let the faith be fleshed out in human, provisional ideologies” (129).

<sup>7</sup> “...the scope of misery and especially of the oppressive and alienating circumstances in which the great majority of humankind exists...is offensive to humankind and therefore to God” (64).

and in the name of “efficacy” has dedicated its best efforts to them” (139).<sup>8</sup> Gutierrez identifies an ecclesiastical model he calls the “distinction of planes,” whereby clergy and laity were to operate in separate spheres, with the clergy providing advice but refraining from direct action in the world (56-57). Although this division was moderated in Europe by the formation of lay apostolic communities, such interpenetration did not occur in the Latin American church, which continued to see direct political action as a betrayal of its role well into the twentieth century (58). As Gutierrez saw it, this model led the Latin American clergy to side with powerful interests. The distinction of planes model thus had the effect of “concealing the real political option [choice] of a large sector of the Church—that is, support of the established order” (64), and groups benefitting from this ecclesiastical disinterest were eager to retain the arrangement. Gutierrez and Segundo agree that this clerical inaction served established interests at the expense of the poor.<sup>9</sup>

Gutierrez’s humanistic exegesis makes possible a new role for the Latin American Church. By emphasizing the moral primacy of the poor and incorporating direct ecclesiastical action to better their condition into the Church’s mandate, Gutierrez believed that the Christian message would resonate more fully among them. As he put it, “[a] clear option in favor of the oppressed and their liberation leads to basic changes in outlook; there emerges a new vision of the fruitfulness and originality of Christianity and the Christian community’s role in this liberation” (104). Indeed, to reconsider the Christian mission in this way would fundamentally alter the role of the Church, as later exhibited by Brazil’s base ecclesiastical communities.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “As a whole the Church in the past has reflected—and indeed still reflects—the ideology of the dominant groups in Latin America. This is what has begun to change” (134).

<sup>9</sup> “...the social influence of the Church is a fact. Not to exercise this influence in favor of the oppressed of Latin America is really to exercise it against them” (Gutierrez 138-9).

<sup>10</sup> “...the scope and gravity of the process of liberation is such that to ponder its significance is really to examine the meaning of Christianity itself and the mission of the Church in the world” (143).

One of the most controversial innovations of Gutierrez and Segundo is the concept of *orthopraxis* – right action.<sup>11</sup> Gutierrez saw orthodoxy and orthopraxis as mutually reinforcing, with one informing the other. He sought to balance what he saw as an excessive emphasis on doctrine at the expense of action, and urged the Church to “modify the emphasis, often obsessive, upon the attainment of an orthodoxy which is often nothing more than fidelity to an obsolete tradition or a debatable interpretation” (Gutierrez 1973:10). As we might expect, Gutierrez saw theological speculation as occurring only in the wake of *praxis*, and regarded “human action as the point of departure for all reflection” (Gutierrez 1973:9).<sup>12</sup>

### *A Return to the Early Church?*

Gutierrez claimed to be recovering a focus on the poor found in the gospels but obscured by Church practice in the intervening centuries, a view shared by other Latin American liberation theologians and intellectuals (Gutierrez 36, Segundo 90-91, Miranda 164). While there is indeed a substantial focus on the poor in the gospels, particularly in Matthew and Luke, this focus is on their superior claim to the Kingdom of Heaven rather than on the injustice of their temporal situation or any prospect of redressing it politically.<sup>13</sup> Notably, Jesus did not denounce exploitation of Jews by Romans, or of traditional Jews by their Hellenized counterparts. While converts are enjoined to give their possessions to the poor (Matthew 19:21, Mark 10:21), this seems to be principally for the benefit of the convert’s soul rather than calibrated to have any salutary social effect. The general impression is one of an acceptance of temporal injustice as an insignificant obstacle to salvation. Rather than (as alleged) a recovery of the practices of the

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<sup>11</sup> Compare the fourth element of the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path.

<sup>12</sup> Gutierrez seems to be urging a process analogous to Goodman’s method of “working from both ends” (Goodman 1955), as well as Rawls’s reflective equilibrium (Rawls 1971).

<sup>13</sup> “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). “For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me” (Matthew 26:9-11). All quotations NRSV. The attitude seems to be one of acknowledging the privileged moral status of the poor but of avoiding political change in order to redress it.

early church, liberation theology's focus on systematically improving the material condition of the poor is clearly an innovation, understandable only in the light of humanism.

Similarly, while the activities of the early Church were indeed principally focused on the giving of alms, there are strong indications that the temporal prosperity of the poor was not the main motivation for this behavior. Augustine's central argument in *The City of God* is that the Earthly City (Rome) and the City of God are in conflict, with the City of God destined to triumph (Book XIX). Notably, the Earthly City is characterized by an immersion in the concerns of this world. Augustine reproves this mundane focus, and implies that even the fall of Rome need be of no concern to pious Christians whose only care ought to be their souls (Book XX). Augustine was well aware that the conquest of Italy by Lombards and Goths meant death and misery for hundreds of thousands of Christians, yet he at no point urges armed resistance.

We can see a legacy of Stoicism here. A point of agreement between late-antique Stoicism and neo-Platonism was the irrelevance of external circumstances to virtue. To be a truly good person consisted in acting rightly no matter the cost. Virtue, the saying went, is sufficient for happiness, and as Aristotle puts it, a man may be happy even under torture (Nicomachean Ethics 8.13.1153b, 19-21). The sublime indifference of Socrates to the dire consequences of acting rightly was admired and imitated by the Stoics, and both Epicurus and Marcus Aurelius instance the irrelevance of external conditions to human virtue.<sup>14</sup>

This Stoic attitude pervaded the Roman aristocracy and was quickly adopted by the early Church, persisting into the middle ages. Pope Gregory I sanctimoniously reproved the Bishop of Vienne for teaching Latin grammar:

“But it afterwards came to our ears, what we cannot mention without shame, that your Fraternity is in the habit of expounding grammar to certain persons. This

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<sup>14</sup> Marcus Aurelius, at least, was not perfectly consistent in this view. Even as he held that external circumstances were irrelevant to his own virtue, he defended the empire's borders and strove mightily to better his subjects' circumstances even though, on the basis of the views presented in his *Meditations*, such actions could not possibly benefit them in the slightest.



thing we took so much amiss, and so strongly disapproved it, that we changed what had been said before into groaning and sadness.” (Gregory I, Letter to Desiderius).

As we might expect, this hostility to popular education accompanied a dramatic decline of living standards during the centuries after Constantine’s conversion of the empire in 306.

There is another sense in which the contemporary program of liberation theology differs markedly from the early, Augustinian church. Liberation theology’s focus on individual human agency resembles the (heretical) Pelagianism against which Augustine fulminated (*De spiritu et littera*), in the sense that it considers reprobate man’s self-improvement possible. Gutierrez wrote that “Humankind is seen as assuming conscious responsibility for its own destiny. The gradual conquest of true freedom leads to the creation of a new humankind and a qualitatively different society” (36).<sup>15</sup> The idea of assuming conscious responsibility for human destiny, as Gutierrez advocates, would have struck Augustine as an instance of the sin of pride, and attempts to build up the Earthly City as at best fruitless diversions from the real task of building the City of God. Going to the heart of the question, Gutierrez asks how we might “relate the work of building a just society to the absolute value of the Kingdom” (135). While Augustine would of course emphasize the value of the Kingdom, Gutierrez answers that we must perceive “the presence of the Lord in history, who encourages us to be artisans of this process” (136). Ultimately, “...the goal is the *creation of a new man*” (146).

These considerations show that liberation theology is not simply a return to early Christian practice. As we will see when considering Shi’a Islam, there may be advantages to the presentation of reform programs as a recapitulation of ancient tradition.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that liberation theology is motivated by temporal concerns that would have found no place in an early church certain of the impending *eschaton*.

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<sup>15</sup> “Latin Americans, by participating in their own liberation, gradually are taking hold of the reins of their historical initiative and perceiving themselves as artisans of their own destiny” (68).

<sup>16</sup> Compare the composition of the biblical book of Deuteronomy.

## *Iranian Liberation Theology*

As we observed in the Latin American case, adherence to rigidly-defined practices (the distinction of planes model) in the face of a changing social reality creates tension, inviting theological entrepreneurs to propose a new exegesis that enables a more useful understanding of contemporary conditions. One such theological innovator, Ali Shariati, provided a revolutionary exegesis of Islam that motivated the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The Iranian Shi'a clergy occupied a similar position to their Latin American Catholic counterparts, in that they viewed their clerical role as precluding involvement in contemporary politics. While prior revolutionary movements like the *Fedayeen-e-Khalq* had been explicitly Marxist in nature, their doctrine had failed to gain purchase in Iranian society (Irfani 117).<sup>17</sup> By contrast, Shariati proposed a revolutionary reinterpretation of Shi'a Islam suited to modern conditions. He castigated both the traditional clergy and the Marxist intellectuals for "severing their relations with society and the masses" (118), and argued that the original version of Islam was "opposed to despotism, capitalism, colonialism and conservative clericalism" (96).

Like Gutierrez and Segundo, Shariati focused on the obligation to alleviate suffering, poverty and injustice in the present world. Taking seriously the Prophet's injunction to strive for earthly equity (*qest*), Shariati saw the world as the scene of a grand battle between the forces of *touhid* (belief in God's unity, implying an obligation to help our fellows) and *shirk* (polytheism, or the elevation of false idols).<sup>18</sup> Echoing Gutierrez on *praxis*, Shariati argued that the essence of *touhid* lay in contact with the people (*al-nas*) and in revolutionary activity on their behalf (Shariati 521).

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<sup>17</sup> Not least because, as Shariati later put it, "the social backwardness and impoverished cultural perspective of the masses had been cleverly exploited by vested interests in the secular and religious domains" (90).

<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to see the reverberations of Manicheism across the centuries. The belief in cosmic duality seems to align deeply with human psychology.

Shariati rejected liberalism, conservatism *and* reformism (which he called gradualism). He instead suggested following the Prophet's approach of retaining the form of a practice but changing its content (Irfani 122). He argued that only by this means can a revolutionary movement retain contact with the people, and that it is impossible to inject new ideas without organic roots into a polity. While this is certainly more forthrightly stated, the fundamental theological innovation of a new exegesis in an old form parallels the subtle maneuvers of Gutierrez and Segundo. In the Shi'a case, the departure from past practice is more explicitly acknowledged: a contemporary saw Shariati as engaged in a battle "to release Islam from the shackles of medieval thought" (Irfani 91). However, Shariati himself argued that he was simply returning to Islam as practiced by the (very) early ummah (Irfani 133).

Like his Latin American contemporaries, Shariati provides a new exegesis allowing the clergy to confront prevailing social problems by redefining faith in terms of practice, and making the fight for earthly equity central to clerical and pastoral activity (compare *orthopraxis*). In addition, he presents this new exegesis not as an innovation but as a return to the practices of the early faith community. His embrace of the *al-nas* as the basis for reflection resembles Segundo's insistence on the perspectival and contingent nature of theology, and the explicit disavowal of the material entanglements entailed by *shirk* is virtually identical to Gutierrez's 'internal liberation'. The moral primacy of the *al-nas* is also directly comparable to the "option for the poor" enunciated by Gutierrez and Sobrino. It seems clear that both movements are responding to a theological landscape where human concerns have moved from the periphery to the center, and where the next world is no longer quite the palliative it once was. As we shall see, Marxism also confronted these questions, but the Marxist response diverges markedly from that articulated by liberation theologians.

## *Is Liberation Theology Marxist?*

Dictionary definitions of liberation theology advert directly to its Marxism (*e.g.* Dictionary of Historical Terms p.203).<sup>19</sup> This relationship is initially puzzling.<sup>20</sup> After all, as one Latin American cleric put it, “we Catholics believe in God, and they don't” (Goshko 2). However, while Marx criticized religion as productive of “illusory happiness” (Critique 53), he also argued that it constitutes a genuine response to the frustration of creative essence through alienation of labor (Critique 132). Marx saw religion as a social product generated by particular forms of society, a product that will be corrected and improved in the first revolutionary phase (Theses on Feuerbach #7).<sup>21</sup> Despite its utility, Marx thought that the community provided by religion was ultimately inauthentic, leading him to characterize religion as “the opium of the people” (Critique p.131). He argued that this self-alienation will be overcome only after the first phase, when the religious world is “resolved into its secular basis” (Theses on Feuerbach #4).

Marx's famous replacement of Hegel's *Geist* with man and his insistence that only the actual is real parallel the Church's Vatican II admissions of human centrality and liberation theology's express focus on *praxis*.<sup>22</sup> The loss of species-being through the development of classes (Jewish Question p.35) and the division of labor fosters alienation, reaching its greatest extent under precisely the conditions of *Shirk* described by Shariati. Marx's nuanced view that political emancipation to some extent prevents social emancipation (Jewish Question 30-31)

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<sup>19</sup> Gutierrez saw the evolution of theology as paralleling the evolution of philosophy, instancing Hegel, Feuerbach and Marx as philosophers to whom theologians have been compelled to respond (219).

<sup>20</sup> The confusion extended all the way to the top. The Washington Post reported in 1983 that “Vice President Bush has become the second high administration official in two days to express concern over the support that Catholic clergymen are giving Marxist revolution in places like El Salvador. Bush...told a private forum of prominent former officials and opinion leaders from North and South America that he is unable to understand how priests can reconcile their faith with Marxist ideas and tactics. Some quoted him as saying, “Maybe it makes me a right-wing extremist, but I'm puzzled. I just don't understand it” (Goshko 1).

<sup>21</sup> Segundo argues that Marx interpreted religion in two ways: as part of the superstructure that will be corrected and improved along with the state in the first revolutionary phase, and as an explicit error impeding popular happiness (59). Segundo argues that although this second interpretation (from the Critique) has dominated, the first is more consistent with the rest of Marx's thought.

<sup>22</sup> Marx wrote that “Hegel proceeds from the state and makes man into the subjectified state; democracy starts with man and makes the state objectified man...just as it is not religion that creates man but man who creates religion, so it is not the constitution that creates the people but the people which creates the constitution.” (Critique 30).

recalls Gutierrez's concept of inner liberation (compare Marcuse's "democratic unfreedom" (One Dimensional Man p.1)). Marx's discussion of exploitation (Capital vol. 1) and the labor theory of value resemble liberation theology's focus on social justice. Gutierrez would enthusiastically agree with Marx's statement to the effect that if the proletariat did not create the revolution for themselves, they would not be worthy of receiving it (Critique 72-73).<sup>23</sup> Segundo's insistence on the inevitability of bias recalls critical theory and the Frankfurt School. In general, it seems that Marxism and liberation theology articulate similar diagnoses of the modern condition.<sup>24</sup>

A major point of resemblance is with the post-Marxist philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.<sup>25</sup> Levinas emphasized the primacy of the human Other. He argued that the Other is not fully knowable and cannot be made into an object of the self, and that face-to-face interactions with others are irreducible, existing only as totalities. "The Other precisely reveals himself in his alterity, not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness" (Totality and Infinity 150). It is this event of being in relation with the Other (which Levinas calls variously "expression," "invocation," and "prayer") that forms the ethical (and indeed religious) basis of his philosophy (Is Ontology Fundamental 3-5). Ethics so understood involves being in a non-subsumptive relationship with the Other – one in which our individuality is retained and enhanced by the appreciation of an Other whom we can never truly know but toward whom we bear "infinite responsibility" (Totality and Infinity 215). Compare Gutierrez's assertion that "[i]n human love there is a depth which the human mind does not suspect: it is through it that persons encounter God" (238), and his characterization of faith as "an act of trust...a going out of one's

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<sup>23</sup> Compare Gutierrez: "But in order for this liberation to be authentic and complete, it has to be undertaken by the oppressed themselves and so must stem from the values proper to them. Only in this context can a true cultural revolution come about" (91).

<sup>24</sup> "...contemporary theology does in fact find itself in direct and fruitful confrontation with Marxism, and it is to a large extent due to Marxism's influence that theological thought, searching for its own sources, has begun to reflect on the meaning of the transformation of this world and human action in history" (Gutierrez 1973:8).

<sup>25</sup> Levinas is perhaps better described as post-Heideggerian.

self” (6) and “the gift of one’s self to the Other” (7). Gutierrez cites Bonhoeffer’s claim that the purpose of freedom is to help others (36), and argues beautifully that “an awareness of the need for self-liberation is essential to a correct understanding of the liberation process. It is not a matter of “struggling for others,” which suggests paternalism and reformist objectives, but rather of becoming aware of oneself as not completely fulfilled and as living in an alienated society. And thus one can identify radically and militantly with those—the people and the social class—who bear the brunt of oppression” (146). Levinas’ secular notion of the Other seems to have provided liberation theologians with a modern articulation of an impeccably Biblical concept.

As we have just seen, Marx observed, in embryo, the aspects of modernity that impel liberation theology’s new exegesis. In addition, we have already seen the reliance Gutierrez and Segundo place on post-Marxist theorists like Marcuse and Levinas. However, the Marxist program of change, particularly as articulated by post-Marxist scholars, goes beyond what liberation theologians would be able to accommodate within their (admittedly wide) exegetical scope. Gutierrez argued that the alignment between liberation theologians and Marxists is the fleeting product of a polarized society, and that in a society featuring more complex relationships there would not be such an easy correspondence (104).<sup>26</sup> We should not assume such a direct correspondence between ‘workers’ and ‘the poor’ in other contexts. Intriguingly, Gutierrez presented the humanistic turn of Vatican II as a response to the prevalence of atheism in the world (152). He regarded Marxist revolutionaries as concerned not with the interests of the poor but with instigating revolution no matter the costs.<sup>27</sup> As we have seen, Shariati argued that Marxists had failed to root their revolutionary movement among the people by reinterpreting existing traditions in new and useful ways. Most fundamentally, it is precisely this proclivity for

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<sup>26</sup> “On this continent, the oppressed and those who seek to identify with them face ever more resolutely a common adversary, and therefore, the relationship between Marxists and Christians takes on characteristics different from those in other places” (104).

<sup>27</sup> “Guerrilla groups appeared, intending quickly to mobilize the masses: they did this by urging them to follow a radical line more than through an organization really representing their interests” (89).

innovation that distinguishes Marxism from liberation theology. In its concern to remain in solidarity with the poor, liberation theology achieves admittedly radical ends by necessarily conservative means (Shariati's "fourth way"). This fundamental methodological distinction from Marxism may explain liberation theology's success in contexts where explicitly Marxist approaches have been discredited.

### *Conclusion*

In this essay, I have shown the deep resemblances between liberation theology as practiced in Latin America and Iran, and I have argued that both movements can be seen as an accommodation of modernity. Their resemblance is enhanced by the repressive nature of the respective clerical environments and the latent inequality within the pastoral populations. In addition, I have shown that the claims made by liberation theologians to be returning to the practices of the early faith community are largely false, and that liberation theology is an ineluctably modern response to a characteristically modern problem. I have pointed out distinctions between the practices of the early church and the program urged by liberation theologians, and I have given Shariati's well-developed rationale for disguising innovation as textual fidelity.

Finally, I have argued that although liberation theology shares Marx's diagnosis of modernity, liberation theology articulates a distinct program of change characterized by the appropriation of conservative instruments for radical purposes. This distinction means that liberation theology, far from being a Marxist project, is in fact an alternative means of redressing a problem that appears to be widely acknowledged both in religion and in philosophy: the problem of modernity, or as Bonhoeffer put it, speaking of God in a world that has come of age.

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