

Liberation Theology Perspective toward Political Involvement of the Church: A Theological Evaluation

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Abstract

This article critically examines liberation theology's perspective on the Church's political involvement, with a particular focus on its Latin American origins, hermeneutical foundations, and theological implications. Rooted in the socio-political struggles of the mid-20th century, liberation theology emerged as a response to systemic poverty, oppression, and injustice, advocating for the Church's active engagement in transforming unjust social, economic, and political structures. Drawing on key theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino, this study analyses the movement's use of biblical narratives—particularly the Exodus—and its interpretation of Jesus' ministry as inherently political. Employing a descriptive-evaluative methodology through library research and critical analysis of primary and secondary sources, the article explores how liberation theology redefines salvation as historical praxis and the Kingdom of God as a call to revolutionary justice. While affirming the movement's prophetic emphasis on the preferential option for the poor, the article also critiques its potential reductionism in biblical hermeneutics and its tension with traditional ecclesial understandings of Christ's apolitical mission. The discussion concludes that while liberation theology offers a necessary corrective to ecclesiastical detachment from suffering, its political framework requires careful integration with broader theological themes such as sin, grace, and eschatology to avoid ideological captivity. This evaluation contributes to contemporary theological discourse by offering a balanced assessment of liberation theology's enduring relevance and limitations.

Keywords: *Liberation Theology, Church and State, Kingdom of God, Social Justice*

Introduction

The increasing number of people in the world brings some problems in the areas of sex, race, social, economic and political problems. As an attempt to face this reality and find an answer to this situation, people expected the church to be involved in solving the matter. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, several forms of liberation theology emerged. It represents a theological framework rooted in the Christian tradition, characterized by its emphasis on social justice, political engagement, and liberation from oppression. The Church's engagement in liberation theology emphasizes a transformative approach to societal structures to address institutional injustices and empower the disenfranchised.

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Each speaks of God as being on the side of the oppressed, and the Gospel as the good news of liberation from their kind of oppression.¹

One form of oppression is the socio-economic and political issues faced by the Third World. Central to liberation theology is the concept of the preferential option for the poor, which posits that the Church must prioritize those who are economically and socially marginalized. Gustavo Gutierrez, one of the theologians of liberation theology, argues that liberation theology seeks to contemplate the experience and significance of faith through a dedication to eradicating injustice and constructing a new society; this theology must be validated by the enactment of that commitment, through active and practical involvement in the struggle undertaken by the oppressed social classes against their oppressors.²

Moreover, to implement this idea, liberation theologians interpret that the church should take real action with the oppressed, including political involvement. This theology asserts that understanding God's revelation requires a commitment to activism and praxis, aligning with Marxist principles that prioritize action over reflection.³ This necessity for political engagement is particularly evident in contexts such as Latin America, where socio-economic inequalities persist, and the Church has frequently advocated political reform to realize the Kingdom of God on earth. It is because "Theology is not, and should not be, detached from social involvement or political action."⁴

The central question guiding this article is: What is the nature and legitimacy of the Church's political involvement according to liberation theology, and how should this be evaluated in light of biblical and theological principles? To answer this, the study investigates the historical emergence of liberation theology, analyzes its foundational hermeneutics—especially the Exodus narrative and the political dimensions of Jesus' ministry—and offers a critical evaluation of its implications for ecclesiology and Christian ethics.

This research is particularly significant for several reasons. First, it provides a comprehensive overview of a movement that has profoundly shaped modern Christian thought, especially in contexts of poverty and oppression. Second, it engages with the theological tensions between prophetic activism and doctrinal orthodoxy, offering insights relevant to churches navigating social justice issues today. Third, it contributes to interdenominational dialogue, especially within traditions such as Seventh-day Adventism, which may hold more cautious views on political engagement.

Method

This study adopts a descriptive-evaluative approach, combining historical analysis, textual interpretation, and theological critique. The primary method is qualitative library research, utilizing peer-reviewed books, journal articles, and theological treatises from

¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 105-106.

² Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1981), 307. See Mario I. Aguilar, Liberation Theology as Political Theory: Marxist Sociology and Systemic Sorrow in José Míguez Bonino and Camila Vergara. *Sociology Mind*. 2024 Apr 28;14(2):168-184. doi: 10.4236/sm.2024.142010.

³ Aguilar, 170.

⁴ McGrath, 106.

both proponents and critics of liberation theology. The data sources include foundational works by Latin American liberation theologians, and secondary analyses from systematic and contextual theology.

The research process involved three stages. First, a historical reconstruction of liberation theology's emergence was conducted, focusing on socio-political conditions in Latin America, the influence of European theological movements, and the role of ecclesial institutions such as CELAM (Latin American Episcopal Council). Second, a thematic analysis of the concept of political involvement examined how liberation theologians interpret Scripture—particularly the Exodus event and the life of Jesus—through a political lens. Third, scholars conducted a critical evaluation to assess the coherence, biblical fidelity, and practical implications of liberation theology's political claims.

The analytical framework integrates historical theology, biblical hermeneutics, and systematic theology. Special attention is given to the movement's use of Marxist categories of class struggle, its understanding of salvation as praxis, and its ecclesiological vision of the Church as an agent of revolutionary change. While the study acknowledges the contextual validity of liberation theology, it also subjects its claims to scrutiny using broader Christian doctrinal standards, including the teachings of Scripture and historic creeds.

Discussion

Liberation theology and its development have generated new theological insights and influenced the development of Christianity. The discussion presents the meaning of liberation theology, its background, and its emergence in Latin America. Further, this chapter also discusses the development of liberation theology.

Liberation theology defined

It is essential not to know the meaning of liberation theology before proceeding to further discussion. Fundamentally, liberation theology is a theological movement based on the expression of the poor and oppressed in the liberation struggle.⁵ Further, liberation theology can be defined as a theological approach that begins with a theological task for the poor and oppressed. It is a “dialectical action-reflection on biblical revelation, history, and the current situation from the perspective of the poor, the exploited, and the oppressed.”⁶

The phrase ‘exploited and oppressed’ may refer to the economically poor, but not necessarily, and certainly not exclusively, to people with low incomes. The exploited and oppressed may be powerless women, Hispanics, blacks, or Asians. They may be minorities in the United States or Europe, but the majority in Peru, Guatemala, Korea,

⁵Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology* (Illinois: Intervarsity, 1992), 211.

⁶K.C. Abraham, ed., *Third World Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 58-59.

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China, the Philippines, or South Africa.⁷

Central to liberation theology is the notion of "praxis," a cyclical process of action and contemplation directed toward social transformation.⁸ This idea involves acknowledging and discerning forms of oppression, critically examining their underlying causes, and interacting with biblical scriptures to inspire action against these injustices. The methodology generally comprises five essential components: recognizing suffering, performing a prophetic critique of oppressive circumstances, examining socio-political contexts, engaging theologically to combat oppression, and promoting structural change for justice.⁹ Liberation theology thus refuses to detach from the intricacies of socio-political circumstances, instead incorporating them into theological discourse.

The ramifications of liberation theology transcend religious boundaries; it is evident in its impact on social movements and educational frameworks, promoting a wider epistemological diversity that reflects the complex nature of global oppression. Contemporary scholarship consistently reevaluates and contextualizes liberation theology, broadening its narratives to confront the problems posed by globalization, environmental disasters, and systemic inequities, thereby demonstrating its enduring significance.¹⁰

Emergence of liberation theology

Liberation theology, emerging predominantly in the 1960s and 1970s, represents a theological framework rooted in the Christian tradition, characterized by its emphasis on social justice, political engagement, and liberation from oppression. This perspective provides a compelling theological evaluation of the Church's role in advocating for the marginalized and oppressed through active political involvement. The Church's engagement in liberation theology emphasizes a transformative approach to societal structures to address institutional injustices and empower the disenfranchised. Latin America was born "dependent," shaped by events in Europe. However, during the latter part of the eighteenth century, Latin America was poor and oppressed. At the time, the French Revolution had spread throughout the Old World and "infected" it with the concept of freedom and emancipation.¹¹

Latin American Movement. In the early nineteenth century, movements sought political independence from Spanish and Portuguese colonial rule. However, when the colonies gained independence, a new problem emerged due to the nation's changing political and economic conditions. Political independence did not bring a better life for the people. Another issue came up because the former colonies became victims of

⁷Alan Neely, "Liberation Theology and the Poor: A Second Look," *Missiology* 4 (October 1989), 392.

⁸Diane William Ferm, Third World Liberation Theology: What's It All About?. *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 51(4), 1985 309-318. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002114008505100405>.

⁹Steve Gowler, Liberation Theology: An Introduction to Its History and Themes. *Counseling and Values*, 31(1), 4-16, 1986. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-007x.1986.tb00471.x>.

¹⁰Raúl E. Zegarra, The Preferential Option of the Poor: Liberation Theology, Pentecostalism, and the New Forms of Sacralization. *European Journal of Sociology*, 64(1), 2023. 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003975623000036>

¹¹Gusto L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 366.

capitalism.¹²

In fact, Latin America had not become stable in the political and economic matters for a century and a half after independence. It remains true that the dream of the Latin American people was not realized until the 1950s. In further development, the period of the 1950s was marked in Latin America by a great optimism in the possibilities of achieving economic growth.

Liberation theology emerged as a response to the economic and social injustices in Latin America, exacerbated by the 1960s. It emerged during a period when military regimes ruled almost every Latin American country. Admittedly, the historical starting point of its reflection was “the dominant situation of Latin America.” This issue affected the church and theological problem at the time.

Theological Movement. There are two significant aspects of theological movements that have led to the emergence of liberation theology. They are the development of Moltmann’s theology of hope during the 1960s and the impact of the Second Vatican Council, held in Rome from 1962 to 1965.

Moltmann’s theology of hope had emerged in Europe during the 1960s and was known as “political theology.” One of his ideas, Moltmann emphasized the importance of social and political approaches to theology. Indeed, He provided a criticism of political and clerical monarchianism. He states that the notion of divine monarchy in heaven and on earth, for its part, generally justified earthly domination; religious, moral, patriarchal or political domination makes it a hierarchy, a ‘holy rule.’¹³

On the other hand, the Vatican II Council played a significant role in liberation theology. It is essential to note that the Vatican II Council revolutionized many aspects of the Roman Catholic Church. For example, considering the opinions of Catholic scholars opened the door to radical social and political involvement by Catholic laity and clergy. As a result, laity and clergy joined hands to advance an agenda of social and political justice in Latin America.

Ecclesiological Movement. One impact of the ecclesiological movement in the 1950s occurred in Latin America. The Latin American General Conference of Bishops led to the creation of the Latin American Council of Bishops, better known as CELAM. The bishops of the Roman Catholic Church gathered in the city of Medellín, Colombia, in 1968 to hold the second meeting of CELAM. One of the agenda items was a theological revolution to face the situation in Latin America.

CELAM II is considered the beginning of liberation theology. The result of the meeting elaborated on the assumption that the injustice, poverty, suffering, and oppression of the people in Latin America were the result of a system of institutionalized exploitation and violence structured to benefit the developed nations. Consequently,

¹²Brian F. Connaughton, “Conjuring the Body Politic from the Corpus Mysticum: The Post-Independent Pursuit of Public Opinion in Mexico, 1821-1854” *The Americas*, Vol. 55, No. 3. (Jan., 1999), 459-465. Article On-line. Available from <http://links.jstor.org/>. Internet. Accessed on 27 November 2025.

¹³ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, translated by Margareth Kohl (San Fransisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 191-192.

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liberation theology has been the most influential theological form in Latin America.¹⁴

Political involvement nature of liberation theology

The political involvement of the church is part of liberation theology. The theology embodies a transformative vision where faith and politics intersect, advocating for the inherent rights of the marginalized and the pursuit of social justice. Its persistent relevance is reflected in its adaptability to various socio-political challenges and its capacity to inspire collective resistance against multifaceted forms of oppression. The discussion is divided into three parts: political theology, the Exodus model, and Jesus and the political world.

The Political Theology. The basic message of liberation theology is the good news of liberation from any oppression. One of the emphases of liberation theology is “liberation from unjust social structures that destroy people.”¹⁵ It is important to note that political, social, and economic structures can be used to oppress. On this stage, the liberation message invites us to work for change and reform the structures of politics, society, and the economy.¹⁶

Liberation theology also emphasizes the practical application of its theory. Gutierrez, one of the most renowned liberation theologians, paid attention to this matter. He seems to quote the words of Johannes Baptist Metz, “the so-called fundamental hermeneutic problem of theology is not the problem of how systematic theology stands in relation to historical theology, how dogma stands in relation to history, but what is the relation between theory and practice, between understanding faith and social practice.”¹⁷ Moreover, Liberation theologians hold a broad understanding of the political as the basis of life. For them, politics is not simply concerned with managing the state, but with how human lives are organized. On the other hand, the Gospel is not a political offering of a particular theory of political management, but a promise and demand for the fulfillment of human life.¹⁸

He also argued that the meaning revealed by theology is achieved only in historical praxis. For him, this praxis is the entire hermeneutical criterion, even for understanding the significance of theology. Such is the political hermeneutic of the Gospel.¹⁹ He concluded that “the theology of liberation is a theology of salvation in the concrete historical and political circumstances of today.”²⁰ This does not mean that other aspects of salvation are pushed completely aside, but, given the social reality, it is legitimate to

¹⁴ David Lorne Smith, *A Handbook for Contemporary Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992), 207.

¹⁵ Robert McAfee Brown, *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 61.

¹⁶ John Macquarrie, *20th Century Religious Thought* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 408-409.

¹⁷ J. B. Metz, *Theology of the Word*, 112. Quoted in Gustavo Gutierrez, *Liberation Theology*, 224.

¹⁸ Rebecca S. Chopp and Ethna Regan, “Latin America Liberation Theology,” in *The Modern Theologian*, ed. David F. Ford and Rachel Muers (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 479.

¹⁹ Gutierrez, 13.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 15.

conclude that the political factor has priority.²¹

The Exodus model. Liberation theology, in its efforts to encourage Christians to abandon immobilizing attitudes, uses the Exodus as a model of liberation. In the Exodus story, God acted in deep solidarity with those who suffered to deliver them from the oppression of Egypt and to set them free. Liberation theologians are very persuasive in emphasizing the need for social justice and concern for people with low incomes in their reading of the Exodus.²²

The liberation of the Israelites from Egypt was an act of justice in which God freed the oppressed and punished the oppressor. Unfortunately, most liberation theologians see this as the only aspect of God's mighty act. On this point, Jose Porfirio Miranda says, "The God who originally revealed himself to Israel was the God of Exodus, and his self-revelation is simply an obligatory intervention on behalf of the oppressed against the oppressor"²³ In this discussion, liberation theologians overlook the principal motive of God's action. God acted to fulfill His promises to Abraham, to reveal His will and to call out His people. Again, Gutierrez presented the concept of God's covenant. However, for him, it is not the calling of a particular people, but rather a movement which led to an encounter with God.²⁴

Latin American liberation theology also stresses the fact that liberation from Egypt was a political act. Furthermore, people begin to see the history of the Exodus. As Alfredo Fierro looks at the Exodus, it is the first event of revelation and salvation. For the first time, human beings realize that they have been saved by God through their concrete experience of liberation from oppression and the attainment of a new freedom.²⁵ Thus, people can see that Exodus physically liberated the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt. The Exodus speaks to the present situation in Latin America, for it reveals that God works in history, not outside it, and that God works to liberate the oppressed in the fullest political sense of the word.²⁶

Jesus and political world. Many Christians conclude that Jesus was not interested in political life and that His mission was purely religious. However, Gutierrez argues that Jesus took on a very definite significance in political involvement. Jesus confronted the major power groups of His society. He denounced the hypocrisy and legalism of the Pharisees. His teachings threatened the privileged position of the Sadducees. Finally, Jesus died at the hands of the political authorities.²⁷

Some other liberation theologians argue for the political dimension of Jesus' life by

²¹Daniel Lukas Lukito, *Making Christology Relevant to the Third World* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang 1998), 79-80.

²²J. Andrew Kirk, *Liberation Theology: An Evangelical View from the Third World* (Basingstoke, England: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1985), 95-97.

²³Jose Porfirio Miranda, *Being and the Messiah: the message of St. John* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1977), 30.

²⁴Gutierrez, 157.

²⁵Alfredo Fierro, "Exodus Event and Interpretation," in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman K. Gottwald (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 476.

²⁶Hugo Assman, *Theology for a Nomad Church*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1976), 35.

²⁷Gutierrez, 225.

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focusing on His confrontations and conflicts with authorities. Ignacio Ellacuria contends that Jesus lived in a highly politicized atmosphere in which all he did necessarily carried political implications. Indeed, His criticism disrupted the entire socio-political power structure. In criticizing the Scribes and Pharisees, he was attacking their monopoly over the faith. He also threatened the power balance between the Roman and Jewish nations. His condemnation of wealth carried the same political implications.²⁸

Sobrino emphasizes the target of Jesus' denunciations. If Jesus does not speak in contemporary terms of unjust structures or institutions, His denunciations are almost collective. They are aimed at the Pharisees because they did not uphold justice. For example, the Pharisees impose intolerable burdens on the people. The wealth refused to be shared with people with low incomes. The anathemas are also directed against the abuse of power, whether religious, intellectual, economic, or political.²⁹

Furthermore, Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God, which gives peace and justice. Leonardo Boff asserts that the kingdom expresses a people's utopian longing for liberation from everything that alienates them. The church is expected to be actively involved in revealing the kingdom of God on earth.³⁰ On this last point Gutierrez write, "to place oneself in the perspective of the kingdom means to participate in the struggle for liberation of those oppressed by others. That is why many Christians who have committed themselves to the Latin America revolutionary process have begun to experience."³¹

Brief Evaluation of Liberation theology's political involvement

Liberation theology emphasizes the liberation of the poor and oppressed through the transformation of social, economic, and political structures. This theology draws on the Exodus narrative, in which God liberates the Israelites from Egypt. This theology also emphasizes class struggle as an explanation of history and salvation.³² Generally, liberation theology uses a hermeneutic method that is intentionally exclusive. Liberation theology focuses on the Exodus motif. However, what about the Fall, the Tower of Babel, the Exile, the Suffering Servant?³³ It is, therefore, a balance and careful study to the Exodus hermeneutic that is needed.

Christ indeed came to proclaim the kingdom of God, which offers hope to humanity. In fact, the proclamation of the kingdom of God was not only a central message of Jesus' teaching, but "it is pivotal for understanding the various aspects of his life and ministry."³⁴ On the other hand, liberation theology expects that Christians who place

²⁸Carlos Bravo, "Jesus of Nazareth, Christ the Liberator," in *Systematic Theology*, eds. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 106-107.

²⁹Jon Sobrino, *Christianity at the Crossroad*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1978), 35.

³⁰Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1978), 135.

³¹Gutierrez, 203.

³²Morris A., *Doing Theology across Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 67.

³³D. A. Carson, *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 190-91

³⁴Michael J. McClymond, *Familiar Stranger: An Introduction to Jesus of Nazareth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 67.

themselves in the kingdom of God have to participate in the struggle for liberation of those oppressed by others.”³⁵

However, Christian’s involvement in the political world to liberate people from poverty and oppression is not the only way to do it. It is because the economic and social problems of Third World countries do not have a single cause, nor will they necessarily be resolved by a change in financial systems.³⁶ Further, regarding Jesus' political involvement, Ellen G. White argues that Christ was repeatedly solicited to adjudicate legal and political matters. However, He declined to intervene in secular affairs. He recognized that the political realm was rife with unjust practices and significant oppression. His sole exposure to these was the declaration of biblical truth. To the vast crowds that followed Him, He imparted the untainted, sacred tenets of God's law and articulated the blessings derived from adhering to these principles. He mandated the significance of justice and mercy with authoritative power. However, He declined to engage in personal conflicts.³⁷

Summary and Conclusion

Summary

Fundamentally, liberation theology is a theological movement based on the expression of the poor and oppressed in the liberation struggle. In the early nineteenth century, movements seeking political independence from colonial rule emerged across Latin America. In fact, Latin Americans had not become stable in the political and economic matters for a century and a half after independence.

Liberation theology emerged as a response to the economic and social injustices in Latin America. It was influenced by Moltmann’s theology of hope and by the Second Vatican Council. Further, the Second Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM II) is considered the beginning of liberation theology. Consequently, liberation theology has been the most influential theological form in Latin America.

The liberation message is to invite churches to work for change and to reform the structures of politics, society, and the economy. Liberation theology should be seen as a theology of salvation in the concrete historical and political circumstances of today. Liberation theology primarily uses the Exodus as a model for liberation. God acted in deep solidarity with those who suffered to deliver them from the oppression of Egypt and to set them free. On the other hand, liberation theology sees the political dimension of Jesus’ life by focusing on His confrontations and conflicts with the political authorities. He proclaimed the Kingdom of God. The kingdom expressed a people’s utopian longing for liberation from everything that alienates them.

Conclusion

³⁵Gutierrez, 203.

³⁶David H. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989). 172-185.

³⁷Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol 9, (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 218.

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