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Rodor, Amin Americo

THE CONCEPT OF THE POOR IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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THE CONCEPT OF THE POOR IN THE CONTEXT OF THE
ECCLESIOLOGY OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

A dissertation
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Theology

by
Amin A. Rodor
July 1986
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ECCLESIOLOGY OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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Fuller Theological Seminary

31 July 1986
Date Approved

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ABSTRACT

THE CONCEPT OF THE POOR IN THE CONTEXT OF THE
ECCLESIOLOGY OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

by

Amin A. Rodor

Chairman: Raoul Dederen
ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: THE CONCEPT OF THE POOR IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY.

Name and degree of faculty adviser: Raoul Dederen, Ph.D.

Date completed: July 1986.

This investigation deals with the concept of the poor in the thought of Latin American Liberation theology, particularly as articulated in the context of the movement's ecclesiology.

Chapter I traces the historical and theological context for the emergence of liberation theology. The focus is placed first on the ecclesiological models through which the Roman Catholic Church expressed its life and mission in Latin America and how it affected the Church's social relations in the area. The impact of the ecclesiological shift of Vatican Council II, in combination with the historical situation of Latin America in the late '60s, is seen as creating the immediate setting for the discovery and option for the poor by progressive Latin American Catholics.

Chapter II shows that, in its effort to place theological reflection at the service of humanization and social changes in a context marked by massive poverty, liberation theology has attempted
to situate theology in history and rethink it "from below." The ecclesiological and pastoral implications of this approach are readily apparent. Demanding from the Church an effective function on the side of the oppressed determines the necessity for an analysis of the society's socio-political-economic situation. Marxist analysis of society is brought into the theological method. Thus, to avoid traditional spiritualization, paternalistic and fatalistic approaches the poor are identified "scientifically" in terms of the Marxist dialectic of history. This pre-understanding of and pre-commitment to the poor fatally shapes the liberation view of sin and salvation, its notion of the "church of the poor" and its re-reading of the Bible. Biblical texts and events dealing with the poor, selectively chosen, are strongly influenced by the adopted conflictive view of society.

Chapter III reflects critically on liberation theology's concept of the poor as framed within the class struggle polarization. Since, when faithful to their methodology, liberation theologians see "the poor" and "oppression" exclusively in socio-economic terms, the reactualization of Christian doctrines from the "perspective of the poor" tends to replace traditional verticalism with the opposite one-dimensional approach. Option for the poor tends to be expressed as an option for the proletariat, and the "church of the poor" tends to become the church of one social class. The last part of the chapter tests the liberationist view of the poor in the light of Scripture.

This investigation concludes by affirming the biblical validity of liberation theology's concern for the poor. "Option for the poor," however, must be cleansed from ideological ambiguities.
Liberation theology could avoid the ideological trap and increase its appealing potential if its view of the poor through sociological criteria were balanced and controlled by the biblical criteria. In the light of Scripture, "option for the poor" is, in fact, option for the needy, independent of conformity with ideological demands.
To Rita

and Dianne
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations, taken mainly from the Religion Index One: Periodicals, of the American Theological Library Association, deviates somewhat from those normally used in Andrews University Theological Seminary doctoral dissertations; but because of certain special needs in this dissertation, this alternative list of abbreviations has been approved.

AAS  Acta Apostolicae Sedis
AER  The American Ecclesiastical Review
AFER  African Ecclesiastical Review
ArchHistDoctLitMa  Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen-âge
AUSS  Andrews University Seminary Studies
BibSac  Bibliotheca Sacra
BibThBul  Biblical Theology Bulletin
BibToday  The Bible Today
BibZ  Biblische Zeitschrift
BZNW  Beihäfte zur Zeitschrift für die Neuestamentliche Wissenschaft
BJRL  Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library
CalThJ  Calvin Theological Journal
CBQ  The Catholic Biblical Quarterly
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>ChH</td>
<td>Church History</td>
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<td>Chmn</td>
<td>Churchman</td>
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<tr>
<td>ChrCent</td>
<td>The Christian Century</td>
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<tr>
<td>ChrCris</td>
<td>Christianity and Crisis</td>
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<td>Chri</td>
<td>Christianity Today</td>
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<td>CienTom</td>
<td>La Ciencia Tomista</td>
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<td>Communio</td>
<td>Communio International Catholic Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>ComVia</td>
<td>Communio Viatorum: A Theological Quarterly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conc</td>
<td>Concilium</td>
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<tr>
<td>CrossCur</td>
<td>Cross Currents</td>
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<tr>
<td>CThM</td>
<td>Concordia Theological Monthly</td>
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<td>CThSocA</td>
<td>The Catholic Theological Society of America</td>
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<tr>
<td>CuadernosTeol</td>
<td>Cuadernos teológicos</td>
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<tr>
<td>CurrTM</td>
<td>Currents in Theology and Mission</td>
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<td>Dial</td>
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<td>DukeDivR</td>
<td>The Duke Divinity School Review</td>
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<td>EAug</td>
<td>Etudes augustiniennes</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>Estudios Centro Americanos</td>
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<td>EcR</td>
<td>The Ecumenical Review</td>
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<td>EthRel</td>
<td>Etudes théologiques et religieuses</td>
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<tr>
<td>EvQ</td>
<td>The Evangelical Quarterly</td>
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<tr>
<td>EvRTh</td>
<td>Evangelical Review of Theology</td>
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<tr>
<td>ExposT</td>
<td>The Expository Times</td>
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<td>Foun</td>
<td>Foundations</td>
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<td>Greg</td>
<td>Gregorianum</td>
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<td>HAHR</td>
<td>Hispanic American Historical Review</td>
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<td>HbNT</td>
<td>Handbuch zum Neuen Testament</td>
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<td>Horizons</td>
<td>Horizons: The Journal of the College Theology Society</td>
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<td>HorizonsBibTh</td>
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<tr>
<td>IDOCBul</td>
<td>IDOC Bulletin: International Documentation Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>IliffR</td>
<td>The Iliff Review</td>
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<td>IndTheolStud</td>
<td>Indian Theological Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interp</td>
<td>Interpretation</td>
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<td>IntRMiss</td>
<td>International Review of Mission</td>
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<td>JAAR</td>
<td>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</td>
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<td>JAOS</td>
<td>Journal of the American Oriental Society</td>
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<td>JBL</td>
<td>Journal of Biblical Literature</td>
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<td>JBR</td>
<td>Journal of Bible and Religion</td>
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<tr>
<td>JEcSt</td>
<td>Journal of Ecumenical Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>JEvThS</td>
<td>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>JIntThC</td>
<td>Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center</td>
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<td>JNearEastSt</td>
<td>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</td>
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<td>Journal</td>
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<tr>
<td>JQR</td>
<td>Jewish Quarterly Review</td>
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<td>JRelThot</td>
<td>The Journal of Religious Thought</td>
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<tr>
<td>JStOT</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</td>
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<td>JthSoAfrica</td>
<td>Journal of Theology for Southern Africa</td>
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<td>JTS</td>
<td>The Journal of Theological Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>LADOC</td>
<td>Latin American Documentation</td>
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<td>LumVit</td>
<td>Lumen Vitae</td>
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<td>Menn</td>
<td>The Mennonite</td>
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<td>The Mennonite Quarterly Review</td>
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<td>Mid-Stream</td>
<td>Mid-Stream: an ecumenical journal</td>
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<td>Missio</td>
<td>Missiology. An International Review</td>
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<td>MissioHisp</td>
<td>Missionalia Hispanica</td>
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<td>ModCh</td>
<td>The Modern Churchman</td>
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<td>MonthlyR</td>
<td>Monthly Review</td>
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<td>NCE</td>
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<td>National Catholic Review</td>
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<td>NovTest</td>
<td>Novum Testamentum</td>
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<td>NouRTheol</td>
<td>Nouvelle revue théologique</td>
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<td>NOxFR</td>
<td>New Oxford Review</td>
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<td>NTSt</td>
<td>New Testament Studies</td>
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<td>OTS</td>
<td>Oudtestamentische Studiën</td>
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<td>Perspective</td>
<td>Perspective: A Journal of Pittsburg Theological</td>
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<td>PMV (E)</td>
<td>Pro Mundi Vita (English Ed.)</td>
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<td>Radical Religion</td>
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<td>Recherches augustiniennes</td>
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<td>RecherScRel</td>
<td>Recherches de science religieuse</td>
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<td>RefJ</td>
<td>Reformed Journal</td>
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<td>RelCommLands</td>
<td>Religion in Communist Lands</td>
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<td>RelEd</td>
<td>Religious Education</td>
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<td>RelLife</td>
<td>Religion in Life</td>
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<td>Religion and Society</td>
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<td>RevEclBr</td>
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<td>RevScRel</td>
<td>Revue des sciences religieuses</td>
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<td>RGG</td>
<td>Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart</td>
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<td>RHPR</td>
<td>Revue d'histoire et philosophie religieuses</td>
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<tr>
<td>SciEsprit</td>
<td>Science et Esprit</td>
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<td>ScotJTh</td>
<td>Scottish Journal of Theology</td>
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<td>SE</td>
<td>Servir</td>
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<td>SixCentJ</td>
<td>Sixteenth Century Journal</td>
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<td>SM</td>
<td>Sacramentum Mundi</td>
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<td>SocComp</td>
<td>Social Compass</td>
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<td>ST</td>
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<td>St Mark's Review</td>
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<td>SWJTh</td>
<td>Southwestern Journal of Theology</td>
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<td>TD</td>
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<td>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</td>
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<td>VetTest</td>
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<td>ZAlttW</td>
<td>Zeitschrift für die altestamentliche Wissenschaft</td>
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<td>ZMissW</td>
<td>Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZNW</td>
<td>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</td>
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study has not been only an individual effort. Therefore, many credits are due. Above all I am grateful to God, the Source of "every good and perfect gift" (James 1:17) and to the Savior and Lord Jesus Christ, who becoming poor, has allowed us to participate in the riches of his grace (2 Cor 8:9). I express my deep appreciation to my doctoral committee, Dr. Raoul Dederen, Dr. Russell Staples, and Dr. George Rice, for their guidance and encouragement. I am particularly thankful to Dr. Dederen for his intellectual stimulation and personal interest. I remember also Dr. Roy Graham and Dr. Werner Vyhmeister, who were originally members of my committee, but who, the former because of his premature death, and the latter because of his call to minister in another position, were not able to assist in this work to its end.

I am also thankful to Dr. Leona Running and Mrs. Joyce Jones for their patience and excellence in editing this work. I am deeply indebted to the SDA South American Division and the SDA Andrews University Theological Seminary, the former for the time, opportunity, and financial support that made it possible for me to enter this degree program; the latter, for the financial help that made its completion easier.

Finally, I am particularly indebted to my wife Rita, whose loving encouragement and willingness to sacrifice were a permanent
source of support. To her and to our little daughter Dianne who, unconsciously, provided inspiration on many occasions, this work is dedicated with deep affection.
INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

Through the impact of the Second Vatican Council's aggiornamento the Roman Catholic Church made a serious attempt to come to grips with the modern era as a prerequisite to fulfilling its evangelical commitment. The theology which blazed forth at Vatican II, as Charles Davis observes, may be characterized as "orthodoxy transposed into an anthropocentric mode." Although it was orthodox doctrine interpreted in transcendentalist, existentialist, and personalist terms, it was also a theology centered upon man. Gaudium et Spes, the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," is particularly marked by an anthropocentric orientation, both in the importance given to man and in pointing to man's

---


3"All things on earth should be related to man as their center and crown" (Gaudium et Spes, art. 12, in Walter Abbott, The Documents of Vatican II [New York: Herder and Herder, 1966], p. 210). See arts. 12-22, on "The dignity of the Human Person," Abbott, pp. 210-218. The Constitution insists on the "excellence of freedom" (art. 17); the "need to promote the common good for the sake of human
responsibility vis-à-vis the world. The Council did not mean only "a bold entry into the political and cultural arena," but it also offered with considerable success a solid theological basis for its unprecedented stance toward socio-political issues.²

Closely intertwined with the impact of the Council, we find at work in the same period parallel forces or "areas of emphasis"³ which powerfully influenced the new trends and launched theology into the present era: The effects of secularization, with its emphasis on dignity" (art. 26); "respect for persons" (arts. 27, 29). Joseph Gremillion remarks that "by this concentration on man in the world Vatican II inaugurated a new stage and quality of consciousness within the Church." The Gospel of Peace and Justice. Catholic Social Teaching since Pope John (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1976), p. 123. This concentration on man was naturally followed by emphasis on social justice (see Gaudium et Spes, arts. 55; 29, 30, 33-39, 40-44; 78; also Dignitatis Humanae in Abbott, pp. 675-688).


²What after Leo XIII's Rerum Novarum (1891) became known as the "social teachings" of the Church, by the time of Vatican II was greatly expanded to include political, cultural, and economic teachings as well. The eruption of the Church's concern for social justice which emerged first in John's XXIII's encyclicals "Mater et Magistra" (1961) and in his 1963 letter to the whole world, "Pacem in Terris" (for an English version of these documents see Gremillion, Gospel of Peace and Justice), took form in Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes. They were followed by Pope Paul VI's "Populorum Progression" (1967) and his apostolic letter "Octogesima Adveniens" (1971). The social mission of the Roman Catholic Church is even more explicitly articulated in the synodal document "Justice in the World" (1971). This document unambiguously affirms that "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world, fully appears to us as a constitutive dimension of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation" ("Justice in the World, art. 6; cf. Gremillion, p. 414).

³For a helpful analysis, see Hennelly, pp. 4-8; also Claude Geffrè, A New Age in Theology (New York: Paulist Press, 1974).
the freedom of human institutions from the hegemony of sacral or ecclesiastical directions;\(^1\) the new approach to history and ortho-
praxis, the former emphasizing the dynamic and evolutionary character of history and the latter stressing the need for transforming action within history;\(^2\) the renewed attention to eschatology and hope, shifting the theological pendulum from faith to hope, from past to future;\(^3\) and finally the emphasis on sociopolitics, expressed in a number of movements of this period,\(^4\) striving to come to grips with Christianity's role vis-à-vis the large issues in the contemporary


world. Combined, these influences provoked a break of main magnitude in theological reflection. Theology began to divest itself of much of the dead weight of prior dogmatics. The often typical characterization of religion as a "private affair" which had dominated the scene for centuries was almost suddenly challenged by a stress on the public character of the Christian message. With the recovery of the social implications of the gospel, theology shifted from its traditional form to "political theology." Theologians began to underline the critical and revolutionary character of faith and focus the spot-light on the "horizontal" dimensions of Christian concerns. Christians were being urged to break with the pietistic and individualistic forms of religious devotions and parochial concerns and to commit themselves to the concrete issues facing the human family at large.

The break of "political theology" with classic theology marked the emergence of theologies of liberation in which the context of oppression functions as the norm and locus of theological reflection. Two of these innovative forms of theologizing, concerned in incorporating the concept of liberation within the understanding

1Fierro, p. 24.

of the function of theology, have emerged as feminist theology and black theology. Although "oppression" may be differently understood, these theologies share a common methodology, common perspectives, and common themes. They both seek to commit Christians to radical political and social change and to transform society in order to create a new and more human world.  

Statement of the Problem

The contemporary attempts to interpret the gospel as good news to the oppressed and the search for salvation as a journey

1Feminist theology conceives oppression in terms of sexism and focuses on liberation from male dominance, to which women historically have been subject. Among the most important works published by participants in the women's liberation theology are: Letty M. Russel, Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective—a Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster press, 1974); Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); Rosemary R. Ruether, Liberation Theology (New York: Paulist Press, 1973); Dorothee Soelle, The Strength of the Weak, Toward a Christian Feminist Identity (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). For a comprehensive bibliography on feminist theology, see Kathleen Storrie, "Contemporary Feminist Theology: A Selective Bibliography," ThStFlBul 7 (May-June 1984): 13-15.


3Letty M. Russel, pp. 50-71.

toward freedom seem to indicate that the conditions of oppression "have reached such an intense level of consciousness that they can no longer be ignored or set aside as unimportant by serious Christians." ¹ It is precisely within this new consciousness developed among the oppressed, and this quest for freedom, that the revolutionary theological development that has emerged from America under the rubric of "liberation theology"² is to be found. It should be


²The '70s witnessed the publication of major theological works by liberation theologians, who in their great majority are Roman Catholics. The pioneer book of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Teología de la liberación—perspectivas, which appeared in 1971, was later published in English under the title A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1973). It became the most influential text of the movement and paved the way for related works of Juan Luis Segundo, Enrique Dussel, Hugo Assmann, José P. Miranda, Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino, and others who in a short time came to the forefront of the theological arena. The imposing quality and erudition of the work of these Latin American theologians was very much, as far as theology is concerned, the fulfillment of Rubem Alves's statement in 1969, "The Third World is neither mute nor reflexive. It will no longer allow either its political destiny or its theological self-definition to come from somewhere else" (A Theology of Human Hope, p. vii). E. Schillebeeckx observed that between 1971 and 1980 "more than 5,000 books and articles [dealing with liberation theology] have seen the light of day." "Liberation Theology Between Medellín and Puebla," THD 28 (1980): 4. Since 1980, hundreds of books and articles dealing with the theme have been published, and liberation theology has become the "most dynamic theological movement of our time" (Anthony Campolo, Partly Right [Waco: Word Books, 1985], p. 145). For bibliographic references to Latin American liberation theology see Jesús M. Díaz, M. Baizan, et al., "Bibliografía," in Fé cristiana y cambio social en América Latina: Encuentro de El Escorial, 1972 (Salamanca: Sigueme, 1973), pp. 391-414; Richard Ortiz, "Fuentes bibliográficas para una teología de la secularización en América Latina," in Fé y secularización en América Latina, eds. J. Comblin et al. (Bogotá: CELAM, 1972), pp. 69-79; F. P. Vanderhoff, Bibliography: Latin American Theology of Liberation (Ottawa: Mimeographed, 1972); Roger Vekemans, Desarrollo y revelación, Iglesia y libertad, bibliografía (Barcelona: Herder,
noted that although Latin American liberation theology is deeply rooted in contemporary theological developments, to limit it to these influences would fail to perceive its distinctiveness and dynamic character. The theology which emerges from Latin America after centuries of theological silence must be understood above all as an attempt to respond to its historical context marked by the overwhelming presence of the poor. In fact, Leonardo Boff, one of the leading liberation theologians, insists that it is impossible to understand liberation theology as something prior to or apart from the extreme poverty to which "millions of our brothers in the Latin American continent are condemned."^1

Under the specific conditions of Latin America, it is

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1 L. Boff, "Declaración" in T. Cabestrero, Los teólogos de la liberación en Puebla (Madrid: Bilbao, 1979), p. 70; the translation is mine. Gutiérrez remarks that "the recent history of Latin America is distinguished by the disturbing discovery of the world of the other—the poor, the exploited class" (A Theology, p. 76). It should be no surprise that concern for socio-economic and political liberation emerged from the Third World. Comprising the great majority of mankind, four-fifths of the inhabitants of the planet here strive and often fail "to survive with the aid of a meager twenty percent of the goods of the earth." Walbert Bühlmann, The Coming of the Third Church: An Analysis of the Present and Future of the Church (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1978), p. 3; see Ronald Sider, Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977). In the Latin American countries, a minority of 5-10% generally controls half the wealth, whereas the lower third of the population may receive only 5% of the wealth. Phillip Berryman, "Latin American Liberation Theology," ThSt 34 (1973):386.

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contended, theology must have a special function. More than anywhere else, theology in this context cannot be an "academic" preoccupation with the past or mere repetition of ancient dogmas, or even a critical-historical exegesis of Scripture. It must be above all a liberating force, committed to "humanize the oppressed" and devoted more to "change" reality than to "understand" or "interpret" it. In the Latin American situation, therefore, theology cannot be less than a theology which stands for liberation.

Basically concerned in relating the teaching of the Christian faith to the situation of the poor and oppressed, and seeking to address theological reflection to their struggles, liberation theology breaks radically with traditional approaches to theology. What liberation theologians propose, however, is not simply a theology that deals with the issues of liberation, but rather one that attempts to reactualize the entirety of Christian faith, doctrine, and life from the perspective of the poor; a theology "from below," or as Gutiérrez describes it, a theology "from the underside of history." From such a perspective, liberation theologians claim,
they can affirm orthodox Christian belief while interpreting it in a radically new fashion.

Liberation theology stresses that there are two central intuitions to its formulation: one is methodological and the other is its frame of reference. While the former takes the poor as the privileged focus and historical subject for theological reflection, the latter stresses that God, as a liberating God, takes unconditionally the side of the poor. According to its method, liberation theology insists that priority must be given to liberative praxis mediated by the instrumental use of the social analysis, as the


2Ibid, 242; Gutiérrez asserts that "the poor is the methodological point of departure for all our efforts of theological reflection" (The Power of the Poor, p. 219, n. 67). This approach, he remarks, is in flat contradiction to the dominant progresista theology of the West, which adopts a different historical subject for its reflection ("Teologia desde el reverso de la historia," p. 393).

3"Without the poor as subject, theology degenerates into academic expertise" (Two Theological Perspectives," p. 247); idem, "South American Liberation Theology," p. 116.
normative element; this is the first act. Theology is the second act. It comes later and reflects on the prior commitment to liberation. Since the biblical data belongs to the "second act," it remains at the secondary comparative and descriptive level.

While attempting to align the Church with the oppressed struggling class, the Latin American theologians of liberation have concluded that the traditional spiritualizing, fatalistic, and paternalistic approaches to the poor have contributed to neutralize all progressive forces for change and must be abandoned. In their effort to provide a basis for the Church's effective involvement in the cause of liberation, liberation theologians approach the poor and poverty along the lines of their stated method. This, however, implies a problem in relation to the identity of the poor. If the theological process is based on the praxis of a particular economic and socio-political mode of analysis, which precedes and informs theological reflection, who, then, are the poor, what are the criteria for their identification, and what is the main rationale for siding with them? Surely, as indicated by their frame of reference, liberation theologians understand their commitment to the oppressed as an imitation of Yahweh's historical concern for the poor, but if their "option for the poor" is primarily informed by a prior

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1Consistently Gutiérrez has affirmed that "from the beginning the theology of liberation posited that the first act is involvement in the liberation process, and that theology comes afterward, as a second act" (The Power of the Poor, p. 200; idem, "Lo importante es la liberación, no la teología," Processo, February 5, 1979, pp. 9-11; idem,La pastoral de la Iglesia en América Latina: Análisis teológico (Montevideo: MIEC-JECI, 1968), chap. 1.
political analysis and commitment at the level of the "first act" (praxis), to what extent is it faithful to the biblical notion of the poor and God's concern for them, which comes into the picture later, at the "second level"?

Aim and Plan of the Study

The centrality of the poor in the minds of Latin American liberation theologians is evident. In fact, the "theme of the poor" has been considered "the driving force of this new reflection."¹ For some, in its protest against the spiritualization of the poor and poverty, liberation theology swings the pendulum to the opposite extreme, thus substituting a one-dimensional perspective for another.² Others have assumed that the approach of liberation theology consists in the identification of the poor in Latin America with the poor of the Gospels.³ Still others charge the theologians of liberation of confusing the poor of the Bible with the modern concept of class.⁴ No detailed study, however, has addressed the crucial aspects of the issue. The aim of this investigation is to examine and reflect


³Rivera and Ramos, p. 160.

critically on the concept of the poor at work in the formulation of Latin American theology of liberation. Although the focus of attention is kept in relation to this central concern, the circle of interest is wider and entails some fundamental questions: (1) How does the adopted concept of the poor function within the method of liberation theology? In this relation, attention is given to the meaning of doing theology "from below," the epistemological approach in relationship to what is being opposed. (2) Since liberation theology proposes a global revision of theology "from the perspective of the poor," how does its understanding of the poor affect its theological content? How are theological themes such as salvation, revelation, sin and ability, eschatology and Christology reinterpreted? (3) Particularly, how is the concept of the poor articulated in its integral relationship with the Church and its mission? Here special attention is paid to the notion of "the Church of the poor" and the terms in which it must express "option for the poor." (4) Finally, what is the biblical basis claimed for a partisan theology and church? How does the poor--as defined according to the theological method of liberation theology--determine its hermeneutical approach and "rereading" of Scripture?

This theological study is divided into three chapters, apart from the introduction and conclusion. Chapter I attempts to trace a major outline of the history of relationship between Catholic ecclesiological thought and the social structure in Latin America. It is divided into two main sections. The first, after a brief historical background, deals with the two ecclesiological models through
which the Roman Catholic Church expressed its life in Latin America during the pre-Vatican II period. The second part examines the post-Conciliar Latin American Catholicism, taking notice of the trends which progressively led some sectors of the Catholic Church to a decisive "option for the poor," an option which, in the eyes of many, reaches its climax in the emergence of liberation theology.

Chapter II, which consists mainly of a cross-section of writings of selected liberation theologians, attempts, first, to understand the meaning of theological reflection from the perspective of the poor. This brief analysis of the method of liberation theology forms the indispensable background for the understanding of the concept of the poor which emerges most clearly in the context of liberation ecclesiology. The last part of chapter II is devoted to an analysis of liberationist hermeneutical postures in the light of its understanding of the poor. Here the reflection is focused on liberation theology's approach to the selected texts of Scripture.

Chapter III consists mainly of a critical evaluation of the findings of chapters I and II. This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first focuses on the implications of theological reflection starting with the "poor" as conceived by liberation theologians. The second reflects on the implications of liberationist concept of the poor for its ecclesiological formulation, and the third is devoted to an analysis of the poor in texts of Scripture used by liberation theologians in order to give a biblical basis to the construction of their systematic theological positions.
Methodology

In an attempt to bring to the surface the concept of the poor sustained by liberation theology, this study examines the ideas of representative liberation theologians, expressed in their available original sources, which have a bearing on the poor. This is done by means of a process—as objective as possible—of description and interpretation. As the primary sources are perused, attention is focused on the kind of emphasis given to the subject, how the concept of the poor is articulated, and the way in which it functions within the general thought of liberation theology, particularly in connection with its ecclesiology.

Since theological reflection is not worked out in a vacuum and theology cannot be divorced from history, appropriate historical information is included to provide the necessary perspective. This is done by means of a survey of primary and secondary sources related to this study. Of particular interest are the documents of Vatican Council II dealing with ecclesiology and social issues, as well as the documents produced by the Medellin and Puebla conferences. Here also, description is intermingled with interpretative insights which take note of trends, emphasis, developments, variations, and reformulations as they may occur. Description and interpretation are followed by a process of critical evaluation. Here the strengths and weaknesses of liberation theology's concept of the poor are assessed on the basis of a variety of criteria, including general logic, theological consistency, exegetical and hermeneutical cogency, and consonance with the biblical data. The general approach to the
issues under discussion reflects a Christian evangelical perspective.

**Limitations**

Although the Protestant contribution to liberation theology has not been without significance, with notable exceptions such as José Míguez Bonino (Methodist) and Rubem Alves (Presbyterian), liberation theology has been mainly identified with the Roman Catholic Church. This work, therefore, is concerned with the Roman Catholic expression of Latin American liberation theology.

Because of the ever-broadening scope of liberation theology and its impact on virtually every segment of the theological spectrum, it has been necessary to limit the field of study in this dissertation. This research concentrates particularly on the thought of leading theologians of the movement: primarily Gustavo Gutiérrez,¹ and secondarily Jon Sobrino,² the Brazilians, Leonardo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian (b. 1928), studied medicine and philosophy in Lima. From 1951-1955 he studied philosophy and psychology at the University of Louvain, in Belgium. As generally observed, it was while he was at Louvain that Gutiérrez began his close friendship with Camilo Torres, who arrived in 1953 from Colombia to pursue studies in the social sciences and later became a revolutionary symbol in Latin America. From 1955-1960 Gutiérrez studied theology at Lyon, France, and at the Gregorian University of Rome. Gutiérrez is considered the "systematic theologian" of the movement (Costas, The Church and Its Mission, p. 223). His magnum opus, *A Theology Of Liberation*, has been translated into several languages, and according to Robert McAfee Brown, an influential North American Protestant theologian, this work may well be the most important book of the '70s.

²Jesuit priest Jon Sobrino is a professor of philosophy and theology at the Universidad José Simeon Cañas of El Salvador. Born in Barcelona, Sobrino has earned his doctorate in theology from the Hochschule Sankt Georgen, Frankfurt. He is the author of two influential works, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*.
Boff\textsuperscript{1} and Hugo Assmann,\textsuperscript{2} Uruguayan Juan Luis Segundo,\textsuperscript{3} and Mexican Jose P. Miranda.\textsuperscript{4} These representative theologians have been selected because of the immense influence they have exercised on liberation theology and the authoritative character of their writings.

\textsuperscript{1}Leonardo Boff (b. 1944) is a professor of systematic theology in Brazil. He received his doctorate at the University of Munich under the late theologian Karl Rahner. He has written several major theological works, the best known of which are Jesus Christ Liberator (1978) and Church Charisma and Power (1985), both published by Orbis Books.

\textsuperscript{2}Hugo Assmann (b. 1933) studied philosophy and sociology in Brazil, and theology in Rome, and has a licentiate in social sciences and a doctorate in theology. Generally considered the apologist of the movement (Costas, The Church and Its Mission, p. 223), Assman, as evident in his main work 

\textsuperscript{3}Segundo, who holds the doctorate from the University of Louvain, Belgium, also studied at the Faculty of Literature at the University of Paris. A Jesuit born in Uruguay (1925), he has studied extensively both theology and sociology, and in 1974-1975, was a guest lecturer at the Harvard University Divinity school. From these lectures came his most recent book, The Liberation of Theology (Orbis 1976). Before that he had written a five-volume series, A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity (Orbis, 1973-1974).

\textsuperscript{4}José Porfirio Miranda was born in Mexico (1928). He studied economics at the Universities of Munich and Munster and received his licentiate in Biblical Sciences from the Biblical Institute in Rome (1967). Miranda has been a Professor of Philosophy of Law and Exegesis in Mexico City, and also worked as an adviser and lecturer for workers and student groups throughout his country. The writings of these theologians reflect the convergence of two strong influences: their formal academic training and their direct contact with the masses of Latin American poor.
CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF LATIN AMERICAN
ROMAN CATHOLIC ECCLESIOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL LIFE

In order to understand and interpret correctly the theological postures assumed in recent times by progressive sectors of the Latin American Roman Catholic Church, it is necessary to put these into their theological and historical context. Past history and present reality in the life of the Catholic Church in Latin America are so intertwined that, as I. Vallier observes, to know what the Church is and what lines of change it is now taking, it is imperative to know what it was and where it stood in the traditional social order. "The changes that are reportedly occurring in Latin American Catholicism," he adds, "cannot be separated from its earlier characteristics nor from the mechanisms it relied on to achieve its objectives."²

To provide perspective, this chapter attempts to uncover the

1The title Catholic Church in this dissertation is used as equivalent to Roman Catholic Church.

historical and theological roots of the modern dilemma in which Latin American Catholicism lives. The intention is not to retell the history of the Catholic Church in the continent, but to retain those details directly related to the basic purpose of this investigation.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first, after a brief discussion of Catholic medieval ecclesiology, deals primarily with the ecclesiological pattern of Latin American Catholicism and the way it affected the relations between the Church and the society in which the latter existed from the beginning of Catholicism in the continent to Vatican Council II. The second focuses on post-conciliar Catholicism in Latin America, noticing the trends of the period, particularly those related to the emergence of Liberation Theology, when the theological pendulum shifted strongly within the Latin American spectrum and the poor became a main issue in the life of the Catholic Church in the continent.

The Church of the Rich

In his message to the world four weeks before the opening of Vatican Council II, John XXIII declared that confronted by the under-developed countries, "the Church presents herself as she is and wants to be, the Church of all men, but in particular the Church of the poor." Yet, when considered sociologically and as a whole, the life of the Latin American Roman Catholic Church, continuing a long tradition, was reflecting a different reality. As Alvaro Barreiro remarked, "One would have to say, changing John XXIII's assertion, that it is the Church of everyone, but especially the rich."

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1 John XXIII, AAS 54 (1962):682, quoted in Yves Congar, Power and Poverty in the Church (Baltimore: Helicon, 1965), p. 149. If the Pope's reference to the "Church of the poor" is taken to mean the "Church made up of the poor," which does not seem to have been the intended meaning, he could not have described the Latin American Catholic Church more correctly. In Latin America, where 38 percent of the world Catholic population lives, two thirds of the people are undernourished and live in extreme poverty; one half of the work force is unemployed or underemployed (Annette Sand, "A Protestant's View of Puebla," Missio 3 [1979]:279). In his description of South America, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., gives a graphic vision of the stark reality: "Here is a subcontinent where one-eighth more people than the population of the United States subsists on less than one-eighth of our gross national product, where 5 percent of the people receive a third of the income and 70 percent live in abject poverty, and where in country after country the political and social structures are organized to keep things that way." Conscientization for Liberation, ed. Louis M. Colonnese (Washington: Division for Latin America, U.S. Catholic Conference, 1971), p. 223. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Alvaro Barreiro argues that the Pope's declaration is truer as an optative and imperative (what the Church intends and ought to be) than as an indicative (what it is). Basic Ecclesial Communities: the Evangelization of the Poor (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1981), p. 4.

2 Ibid. Commenting on John XXIII's statement, G. Hourdin observed that in the last centuries, the Church has appeared as being
From the period of the conquest and colonization of Latin America, the Church defined its place within the historical context of the social process of the continent as a dependent partner of ruling classes and privileged elites, a condition that remained unchanged through the nineteenth-century wars of independence and industrialization. It "has survived to modern times, and became a root cause of the growing division between a Church of accommodation and a Church of liberation."^2

Although this coalition between the Catholic Church and the established order and economically powerful classes has complex and interrelated causes, it seems that the traditional Catholic under-

the Church of the rich, with the majority of the faithful from the middle and upper classes or conservative rural people of the white race, who have invoked the Church's name to protect their temporal interests. Cited by Paul Gauthier, Consolez mon peuple, le Concile et l'Eglise des pauvres (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1965), p. 221.

^1 Thirteen years ago, Gutiérrez described the ambiguous situation of the Catholic Church in Latin America as follows: "The Church is not only tied to the established order in a thousand ways, conscious or unconscious, but is still, in a way, an integral part of it. The Church legitimates it, sacralizing situations of injustice and oppression or, at best giving its blessing to superficial and ultimately fallacious efforts at reform and modernization. And in many countries of the continent, four centuries of history have produced a strong identification of Church structures with those of the ruling social system." "Contestation in Latin America," in Contestation in the Church, ed., Teodoro Jimenez Urresti (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), p. 40.


^3 One of these causes has to do with the historical and theological context of Catholicism at the time it penetrated Latin America. Coming to the new World during the Counter Reformation, the Catholic Church was deeply marked by a defensive syndrome. This
standing of the Church and its mission became the major cause in determining how the relations between the Church and society were to be expressed.

As I. Vallier remarks, another cause for the alliance between the Catholic Church and ruling classes in Latin America was the very way in which Catholicism was established throughout the continent. Casually disseminated rather than carefully planted, the Church had to face great distances and geographical isolation. In result each ecclesiastical unit became subject to extra-ecclesiastical controls, often deriving its decision-making from local non-religious elites without any control from a united religious hierarchy. This situation tended to create the formation of short-term political coalitions to produce immediate ad hoc solutions to pressing problems. The development of this "strategy of survival" determined that practical problems took precedence over theological principles and ethical codes (Catholicism, Social Control, and Modernization in Latin America [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall 1980], pp. 24-28; see also Vallier's "Religious Elites," pp. 191-193.

Furthermore, a great number, if not the majority of Latin American priests, especially during the colonial period, came from the upper classes and therefore brought to the Church an upper-class mentality (Ronald M. Glassman, Political History of Latin America [New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969] pp. 177-186; Vallier, "Religious Elites," p. 203). This "upper-class mentality" was strengthened by the intellectual influence of the colonial Catholic Universities in Latin America, which, molded and dominated by the scholastic nature of their educational philosophy, became in the New World the bastions of a worldview more appropriate to the Middle Ages with their feudal institutions (see David M. Traboulay, "The Church and the University in Colonial Latin America," ZMissW 63 [1979]:294).

According to another theory, when Latin Americans overthrew Spanish rule in the early 1800s, the new states seized the ecclesial properties. Left without means to support itself, the Catholic Church became dependent on the wealthy classes (Leonard Gross, "The Catholic Church in Latin America," Look, October 9, 1962, p. 32). This position, however, overlooks two basic facts: first, the alliance between the Church and the wealthy groups in Latin America existed long before the independence movements of the early nineteenth century. Second, the wars of independence initially did not really change the basis of religion's relation to power (J. Andrews Kirk, Liberation Theology [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979], pp.3-8; cf. Edward Norman, Christianity in the Southern Hemisphere [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981], p. 1). During the second half of the nineteenth century the Church came under fierce attack by the
For most of its history, the Catholic Church in Latin America was only an extension of the Catholic Church that existed in Europe, especially in the Iberian Peninsula at the time of the discovery of the new lands. Thus the history of Latin American Catholicism began long before its arrival on the continent and was inevitably and deeply marked by events which took place within the Roman Catholic Church in its European medieval context. Therefore, before turning our attention to Catholic ecclesiological developments in Latin America, a brief treatment of Catholic medieval ecclesiology with its culmination in the post-Tridentine period is in order. The following section is devoted to this foundational discussion, since it was precisely this model of the Church that, transported to the new Word, to a great extent shaped the destiny of Spanish America.

Roman Catholic Medieval Conception of the Church

The "Absolutist" Church

Historical conditions in the Middle Ages increasingly moved the church to expand on the Augustinian concept of the "City of God,"¹ a

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¹Augustine's De Civitate Dei had a commanding influence in the Middle Ages. See Henri Daniel Kops, The Church in the Dark Ages, 2 vols. (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1962). However, as Trevor Rowe points out, "few books with such influence have been so ill-understood." St. Augustine (London: Epworth Press, 1974), p. 105.
notion that helped to form the ideal of Christendom, the dream of a Christian Civilization, and eventually, as if Augustine's vision had been realized, led the church to understand itself as the Kingdom of God upon the earth. It should be noted however, that, as Richard


1) Although in the *De Civitate Dei* Augustine did not propound a theory of a Christian state, neither was he concerned with relations between church and state (Baynes, pp. 292-293), as the Middle Ages wore on, his phrases and ideas produced a political and social ideal of an organically unified Church-State, a Christian civilization. Edward R. Hardy, Jr., "The City of God," in *A Companion to the Study of Augustine,* ed. Roy Bartenhouse (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 257; Everett L. Wilson, "'The City of God' and the Emergence of Christendom," *CovQ* 42 (1984):15-25. The Middle Ages, as Hans Kung notes, were marked by an often massive consciousness of a real Kingdom of God present on earth. For medieval theology, although "detailed interpretations changed and varied . . . Christendom, the corpus christianum guided by regnum and sacerdotium, was for all practical purposes identical with the civitas Dei." H. Kung, *The Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), p. 131. Progressively, however, there was a natural tendency to extend the name of the Church to cover Christendom itself. Charles Journet, *The Church of the Word Incarnate,* 2 vols (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955), 1:242. Etienne Gilson also points out this strong tendency to "identify Christendom with the Church, as if the temporal and historical matter had been wholly absorbed into the spirituality of its end" ("La tradition française et la chrétienté," *Vigile* 5 [1931]:68). The church itself became the embodiment of the civitas Dei.

2) For the majority of modern scholars, the equation of the civitas Dei with the ecclesia was not part of Augustine's thought (see E. Gilson, *Introduction a l'étude de saint Augustin* [Paris:
McBrien observes, no element in traditional ecclesiology had more

Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1943], p. 238; for contrary position see F. E. Cranz, "De Civitate Dei XV, 2 and Augustine's Idea of the Christian Society," Speculum 25 [1960]:219). Although it seems evident that the civitas Dei is much more than the ecclesia (Bayes pp. 302-303; A. Lauras and H. Rondet, "Le thème des deux cités dans l'ouvrage de saint Augustin," EAug 1 [1953]: 97-160; Congar, "Civitate et ecclesia chez Augustin. Histoire de la recherche: son état present," RéAug 3 [1957]: 1-14), at times Augustine does identify the Church with the civitas Dei (De Civ. XII, 16, VII, 24, XVI, 2; also Enchiridion de fide spe et caritate (see Gerhart Ladner, The Idea of Reform [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959], pp. 272-281). Furthermore Augustine's interpretation of the millennium (Rev. 20:1-6), where the Church is seen as the historical form of the thousand-year kingdom and hence as the Kingdom of Christ (De Civ. XX, 7, 8, 9), provided additional support for the identification of the Church with the Kingdom. See Elwyn A. Smith, "The Impact of St. Augustine's Millenialism on the Function of Church Tradition," JEcSt 3 (1966):130-145; Küng, p. 128.

Leaders of the medieval Church, following especially the example of Gregory I (c. 540-604), regarded the Church as 'the Kingdom of God'. See Margaret Deansly, A History of the Medieval Church 590-1500 (London: Methen, 1960), pp. 15-29; Wilhelm Pauck, "The Idea of the Church in Christian History," CHH 21 (1952): 192. Eventually, as M. Hoffman notes, the Church could understand herself as God's state on earth, a worldly, even political agent wielding spiritual power. "Church and History in Vatican II's Constitution on the Church: A Protestant Perspective," ThSh (1968): 195-195; see also Yves Congar, L'Eglise de saint Augustin à l'époque moderne (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1970), pp. 51-197; Karl Frederick Morrison, The Two Kingdoms: Ecclesiology in Carolingian Political Thought (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964). Progressively this fusion of the historical and the eschatological which made the Church here and now identical with the Kingdom of God, became a normative ecclesiological pattern. Ecclesiologists such as James of Viterbo, John of Torquemada, and Robert Bellarmine increasingly identified the Church as God's Kingdom, thus establishing a standard conception for later centuries when the key concept in Catholic ecclesiology was "the Church as the kingdom of God." Gustave Weigel, "Catholic Ecclesiology in Our Time," Christianity Divided, ed. Daniel J. Callahan et al. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), p. 179. In recent times, the complaint of Orthodox theologian S. Bulgakov is very well taken: "Above all," he remarks, "Catholicism is organization; the church as authority and kingdom, civitas divine in terrenis" ("Le Ciel sur la terra," Una Sancta 3 [1927]:43). Up to the time of Vatican II this understanding was still strong in Catholic ecclesiological thought. C. Journet, in a book especially recommended by Pius XII, wrote: "We believe that it is impossible to avoid identifying the Church and the Kingdom. These
serious implications than this notion that the church and the Kingdom were identifiable.¹

The logical results of this equation became readily apparent and marked the history of the Catholic expression of Western Christianity throughout the centuries. This conception resulted in an ecclesiologia gloriae, which tended to absolutize the church, its institutions and clerical hierarchy, with a parallel ecclesiocentric reduction of salvation.² In addition, the fusion of the historical and the eschatological, expressed in the ecclesiological formula church/Kingdom, placed great emphasis on the external and visible

diagram

are two notions but the same reality. Church is the Kingdom and the Kingdom the Church." L'Eglise du Verbe Incarné, 2 vols. (Paris: DESCLEE DE BROUWER, 1962), 2:227.


²The identification of the Church with the Kingdom provided a basis for the absolute claims of the visible Church. Robert D. Haight, "Mission: The Symbol for Understanding the Church Today," ThSt 37 (1974): 628, n. 13. "To apply to the Church what is said in the New Testament about the reign of God," Küng remarks, "will inevitably lead to an intolerable glorification of the Church, the presentation of an ecclesiologia gloria, with the Church as its end" (The Church, pp. 130-131). Peter Hebblethwaite also notes that where Church and the Kingdom are identified, there is the danger of "institutionalization and making absolute of the visible Church." Theology of the Church (Notre Dame: Fides, 1969), p. 33). The Church came to perceive itself as the exclusive depository of grace, being transformed into a hierarchical and sacramental institution for salvation, an understanding explicitly assumed in the famous axiom extra ecclesiam nulla salus. Under this absolutist conception, the Church was pictured as the "ark of salvation," the "bark of Peter," "riding triumphantly over the billows of life, its captain the pope, its crew the bishops, and its cargo the huddled masses of the laity whom they have rescued from the waves." George A. Lindbeck, The Future of Roman Catholic Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), p. 29.
Church. It also promoted the development of strong ecclesiocentrism.

Besides this hint for the Christendom vision and eventual equation of the church with the Kingdom, De Civitate Dei provided for medieval reflection a parallel line of theological interpretation of decisive significance. Augustine's duality between sin and grace, as interpreted in the sociopolitical context in which the Church lived, gave origin to what has been historically called "Political Augustinianism," a conception which became the basis for the relations between the church and the political society and greatly

1Since the Church is the visible Kingdom of God upon the earth, concern for the visible and external expression of its institutional forms, sacramental realities, and juridical structures in the midst of human society was unavoidable. Probably the best symbol of this development is found in Robert Bellarmine's definition of the Church and his understanding of membership in it (see below, p. 35).

2"If the Church alone is the Kingdom of God," Berkhof remarks, "then all Christian duties and activities must take the form of services rendered to the Church, for Christ speaks of the Kingdom as the highest good and as the goal of all Christian endeavour. Natural and social life thus assumed a one-sided churchly character" (p. 233). This was precisely the heart of the Christendom mentality (see Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 53-54). A real Verkirchlichung—which injected ecclesiastical influence into all phases of life—was accomplished to such a remarkable extent that the Church came to be seen as the center of history (Richard McBrien, Do We Need the Church? [New York: Harper & How, 1969], p. 104), permeating all spheres of personal and social existence with hierarchical controls and sacramental blessing (Pauck, pp. 202-204; McBrien, p. 105).

reinforced the absolutist vision of the Church. Elaborating on Augustine's notion that civil government is rooted in human sinfulness,¹ the church justified its intervention in the temporal sphere, which under the law of sin lacked autonomy and consequently could not exist outside of it, the exclusive depository of grace.² The result was not only a symbiotic relationship between the spiritual and the temporal in order to create the ideal of the civitas Dei, of which the Church was the embodiment, but also meant a complete absorption of the natural into the supernatural.³


²See Arquillière, L'Augustinisme politique, p. 54. The dominance of the 'spiritual' over the 'temporal' was so pervasive that the result was the suppression of the distinction between sacred and profane, within an ecclesiocentric sacralization, which led to a religious totalitarianism (Manzanera, Teología e Salvación-Liberación, p. 99). Edward Cranz notes that the City of God, the ecclesia, so completely absorbed the
Progressively the Church came to occupy a privileged position in a context pervaded by mass Christianity, and in its attempt to Christianize society—an ideal regarded as tantamount to the establishment of the Kingdom of God, it became historically bound to Western culture and its feudal system. In this process, the Church was not only secularized,¹ becoming a temporal power whose authority was defined in terms of material extension and without hesitation relying on the sword, it was also being reduced either to a "dictatorial monarchy or an aristocratic oligarchy."²

Church-centered ecclesiological conception

From the thirteenth century on, as the enormous structure of theocracy and theology began to be questioned, the church became earthly city and earthly kingship, that it became dominant in human society, and "history became the story not of two cities but of one" (p. 221).

It is significant that from early Middle Ages, Spain fully endorsed the synthesis between the church and temporal powers. In the seventh century, the great Spanish scholar, Isidore of Seville, whose encyclopedic labors made him the educator of his contemporaries and of the generations that followed, found the mingling of spiritual authority and temporal power entirely natural. He "even thought it natural that terror should be used to compel the acceptance of Christian principles" (Rops, 2:88-89; Arquillière, p. 142; Walter Ullmann, The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages [London: Methuen, 1955], pp. 29-30), a notion that would later influence the conquest and evangelization of Latin America.


increasingly defensive and centralized; its claims intensified. Thus, this period witnessed a turning point for the theological reflection on the Church. ¹ Facing secular and civil encroachment, ² the inroads of conciliarism and the threatening emphasis on the "spiritual

¹During the early period of scholastic theology, there was no specific treatise dealing with the Church (Congar, L'Eglise, p. 217). Scott H. Hendrix points out that the locus, De Ecclesia, is the most elusive of all the theological loci in medieval literature. Ecclesia in Via (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1974), p. 2. The ecclesiology of the scholastics is for the most part to be found in their doctrines of grace and the sacraments. Eric G. Jay, The Church: its Changing Image Through Twenty Centuries, 2 vols. (London: SPCK, 1977), 1:114. Perhaps the fullest treatment of the doctrine of the church is that of Thomas Aquinas in his Expositio super symbolo apostolorum, written already within the thirteenth century. See Congar, "The Idea of the Church in St. Thomas," The Thomist 1: (1939): 331-359; Congar, L'Eglise, 232-241; Avery Dulles, A Church to Believe In (New York: Crossroad, 1982), pp. 149-169.

²The thirteenth century, with the rediscovery of Aristotle, marked a turning point for the history of Christian thought. See Justo González, A History of Christian Thought, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 2:255-290. Under the influence of Aristotle, Aquinas argued that civil society did not arise from a corruption of human nature but from the intrinsic quality of human beings. Thus, on Thomistic premises it became possible to construct a theory of an autonomous state, functioning justly according to its own laws and independent of ecclesiastical supervision (see Tierney, pp. 165-171; T. Eschmann, "St. Thomas Aquinas on the Two Powers," MedSt 20 [1958]: 177-205). This, however, did not mean the end of Political Augustinianism. When the church in the scholastic period regarded itself as a societas perfecta in contrast to civil society (Peter Riga, The Church Renewed [New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966], p. 62), it did not attempt to retain the meaning of the more recent conception of the church as a perfect society, according to which the autonomy of the State is admitted. Rather it referred to the Church as the ultimate and all-embracing society of redeemed mankind, of which the State was only a function. Thomas M. Parker, "The Medieval Origins of the Idea of the Church as a Societas Perfecta," Miscellanea Historiae Ecclesiasticae (Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1960), pp. 23-31. Even Aquinas, after asserting the essential independence of the secular power, ambiguously added that the Pope "holds the apex of both authorities, the spiritual and the secular" Commentum in VI Libros Sententiarum (1253-1255), cf. E. Lewis, Medieval Political Ideas (New York: Knopf Press, 1954), p. 566.
church," with its disruptive notion that the visible church on earth was not to be identified with God's true church,\(^1\) Catholic ecclesiology progressively became "apologetic, polemical and canonical."\(^2\) As key assumptions such as the authority of the Pope, the reality of the Church as an institution for salvation, the locus of the Church's authority, the sacerdotal priesthood, and the necessity of the sacramental system came under fierce attack, the defenders of orthodoxy started placing increasing stress on the external, visible, and institutional dimensions of the Church.\(^3\)

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\(^1\) The list of the enemies of that strand of Catholic ecclesiology which prevailed in pre-Reformation times—besides the emphasis of men like Marsilius of Padua and William of Ockham (see John J. Ryan, The Nature, Structure and Function of the Church in William of Ockham (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979)—included John Wycliffe and John Hus, who during the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries posed a formidable challenge to Catholic ecclesiological thought. Wycliffe and Hus argued that only the elect are members of the Church. Consequently, since predestination is a matter known only to God, it followed that the church is essentially invisible, a notion that undermined the Christendom conception, based on external membership on the Church through the sacramental system. See Eric G. Jay, 1:132-136; Matthew Spind, John Hus' Concept of the Church (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966); for bibliography on Wycliffe's works, see Jay, p. 229, note 18).

\(^2\) McBrien, Do We Need The Church?, p. 103. From the thirteenth century on, Yves Congar notes, ecclesiology was built like the Second Temple of the Jews, sword in hand (cited by Peter Riga, p. 62). This strong reaction to criticism was in itself a result of the Catholic understanding of the Church's nature. As McBrien suggests, because the conventional ecclesiology held that the church was already the kingdom of God on earth, to criticize the church was tantamount to criticizing God Himself (The Remaking of the Church, p. 32).

\(^3\) Starting with James de Viterbo's De Regimine Christiano, considered the "oldest treatise on the Church" (H. X. Arquilliére, Le plus ancien traité de l'Eglise: Jacques de Viterbe, De Regimine Christiano, [1301-1302], études des sources et édition critique [Paris: Bloud & Gay: 1925], p. 10), Catholic ecclesiological thought became reactionary and overly concerned with questions of power and...
In pre-Reformation times, this development of a church-centered theology climaxes with the Spanish theologian John of Torquemada (d. 1468), considered "one of the greatest ecclesiologists of the fifteenth century." His *Summa de Ecclesia*, published a few years before the discovery of the New World, provides a synthesis of traditional ecclesiological postures, as well as important insights into the mind of the Catholic Church, especially in Spain, on the eve of the discovery of the new lands. Torquemada's *Summa de Ecclesia*, with the authority and rights of the Church. Viterbo's *De Regimine Christiano* speaks of the Church as kingdom, which is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. He refers to the Pope as the Vicar of Christ, to whom temporal kings and princes are subject. See H. X. Arquilliere, "Jacques de Viterbe," *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, 15 vols. (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Aine, 1947), 8:305-309. Viterbo's work was followed by Giles of Rome *De Ecclesiastica Potestate*; John of Paris *De Postestade regia et Papa* (both published around 1302), and Agostino Trionfo *Summa de Postate* (1328); see E. J. Gratsh, *Where Peter Is: A Survey of Ecclesiology* (New York: Alba House, 1975), pp. 271-277). McBrien notes that all these ecclesiological treatises published shortly after Viterbo's *De Regimine* expressed a reactionary theology in the strictest sense of the word, "a reaction against contemporary challenges to the traditional institutional structures of the church" (Do We Need the Church? p. 102).


John of Torquemada (not to be confused with his nephew, Thomas of Torquemada, the Spanish grand inquisitor) wrote his "masterpiece," as J. C. Fenton calls it ("Towards an Adequate Theological Treatise De Ecclesia," *AER* 135 [1956]:187), around the middle of the fifteenth century (see Gratsh, p. 103; Maguire, p. 9). It was published posthumously, however, first in 1480 and 1489 (ibid), i.e., a few years before the New World opened its doors to Spanish Catholic colonization.

*See Congar, L'Eglise*, p. 340

*Torquemada's Summa de Ecclesia* is important for two reasons:
Ecclesia, regarded as the "most influential pre-Reformation writing on the church," is also one of the strongest evidences of the excessive emphasis on the external nature of the Church. The Spanish theologian discusses the Church as a 'kingdom,' reaffirming the old formula that there is no salvation outside the church. As to the relations between the spiritual and temporal powers, Torquemada argues that since the pope possesses the fullness of spiritual power, he has ex-consequenti power over the temporal.

first, for its influence on subsequent ecclesiologists including Bellarmine in Counter-Reformation times; second, as Jay underlines, "it sets out clearly, close to the beginning of the Reformation, the papal idea of the Church, which a large part of Europe was emphatically to reject" (p. 141). However, it is precisely this conception of the church, tenaciously held in Spain and hardened by the Counter-Reformation movement, which was transported to Latin America, with far-reaching implications for the history of the continent.

1Fenton, p. 187.

2Riga, p. 63; Künig, p. 345; Congar, l'Eglise, p. 341. Torquemada's systematic treatise gave new foundations to Catholic ecclesiology (Künig, p. 570). Torquemada's Summa is divided into four books devoted to the Universal Church, the Primacy of the Pope, General Councils, and Heretics and Schismatics, but, as Riga notes, "not one word on the interior and spiritual element of the Church" (ibid.). Although Torquemada sometimes describes the Church as the congregatio fidelium, his general emphasis on the hierarchical structure, and for him "the institutional Church as it existed in the mid-fifteenth century was a development in accordance with the will of God" (Jay, p. 141).

3Summa de Ecclesia 1, 34, cited by Jay, p. 140.

4Ibid., 1, 21, cited by Jay, p. 140.

5Ibid., 2, 113, cited by Congar, p. 341. Torquemada keeps considerable distance from the hierocratic ideas. Under the influence of Thomism he recognizes the independence of the two powers (ibid). As John Courtney Murray observes, however, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Christians for the most part lost hold of the full implications of Thomas' philosophy of the autonomy of the
The reactionary trend which had marked the ecclesiological conception of the preceding period reached its climax with the sixteenth-century Counter-Reformation movement. Facing Protestant doctrinal 'innovations,' the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent¹ and in the following years felt compelled to define matters which until then were assumed more than explicitly proposed. In this polemical context, as Justo González notes, "whatever the Protestants attacked, now became official and final doctrine of the Catholic Church."²

political order. Although Thomistic political philosophy supported the conception of two separate powers within two distinct societies, it still had to face a serious rival, political Augustinianism, which explained in quite other terms the origin of temporal power, its function, and its distinction from the ecclesiastical power. "St. Robert Bellarmine on the Indirect Power," ThSt 9 (1948):503. Even after Trent the Church was still claiming direct authority in the temporal order, as evident in severe papal reactions against the theory of the "indirect power" (see J. González, A History of Christian Thought, 3:191-194; Vicente Beltrán de Heredia, "Doctrina de Francisco de Vitoria sobre las relaciones entre la Iglesia y el Estado y fuentes de la misma," CienTom 56 [1937]:22-39; Murray, pp. 491-535.

¹For the Council of Trent, see Hubert Jedin, History of the Council of Trent, 3 vols. (New York: Herder & Herder, 1957). Trent was marked by two strong characteristics: first, its reactionary character, evident in the fact that it alone produced more condemnations than all previous councils together (see H. Daniel-Rops, The Catholic Reformation [New York: E. P. Dutton 1963], p. 135). Second, its clarity in defining the dogmas of the Church. Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that the Tridentine Church is first and foremost orthodox, concerned above all with the security of doctrine and loyalty to already accepted dogmas. Thus the changes brought about by Trent did not constitute a "new religion," they were necessary steps taken to preserve the old. As Daniel-Rops points out, "there is no measure adopted by the Council... whose origin cannot be detected in the earlier principles and organizations of the church" (ibid., 132).

The Protestants denied the visible, external, juridical, institutional, and hierarchic church, as well as the system of relationship between the Church and temporal powers imposed by the Christendom conception. The severe criticism of the reformers, however, as McBrien remarks, "only intensified the 'orthodox' bias in favor of structures, juridical procedures, and institutional realities." Formulated in a reactionary spirit, Counter-Reformation ecclesiological understanding was a result of the emphasis of theologians and canonists who, in defense of traditional notions, "accented precisely those features that the adversaries were denying." Consequently the strand of Catholic ecclesiology that

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3 McBrien, Do We Need the Church? p. 103

emerged in the post-Tridentine period,\(^1\) when traditional concepts were officialized, did not produce a new vision of the Church. It rather forced it to concentrate even more on its claims as an external, visible, and universal institution for salvation by emphasizing even more its juridical character and its absolute authority in the papal office.\(^2\) In addition, as Ron W. Walden points out, the Counter-Reformation doctrine of the church was designed to defend a particular relationship between church and society and to justify the church's privileged position in a culture pervaded by mass Christianity, against the attacks on what has come

\(^{1}\)The Council of Trent itself did not deal directly with the subject of ecclesiology. In relation to this apparent omission, Congar remarks, "Fait étrange: ce concile qui devait répondre à la Réforme n'a pas traité le problème ecclesiologique" (L'Eglise, p. 364; see also T.J. Sparrow Simpson, The Catholic Conception of the Church [London: Paternoster Row, 1914], pp. 220-225). Nevertheless, throughout the documents of the Council the traditional notions are assumed. Congar points out: "Il a, dispersées ici et là, des allusions à des thèmes ecclesiologiques classiques" (p. 364). The Council anathematizes "whoever says that in the Catholic Church there is not a hierarchy instituted by divine ordination, consisting of bishops, priests and ministers." Karl Rahner, ed., The Teachings of the Catholic Church (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1967), p. 346, n. 638. A Catechism published in 1566, however, provides some insights into the ecclesiological thought of Trent. The visibility of the Church is emphasized. The Church is compared with the 'ark of Noah,' "all that enter therein through Baptism, may be safe from danger of eternal death" (Catechism of the Council of Trent, translated and annotated by J. A. McHugh and C. J. Callan [New York: Joseph F. Wagner, 1956], p. 107); those, outside "infidels, heretics and schismatics, and ex-communicated persons" are excluded from the Church's pale" (p. 101), "overwhelmed by their own crimes" (p. 107). The Catholic Church alone has the "legitimate worship and sacrifice and the salutary use of the sacraments." The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, translated by T. A. Buckley (London: George Routledge and Co., 1852), p. xiii.

Counter-Reformation ecclesiology, which hardened the patterns of behavior, feeling, and thinking that had characterized the main line of Christian tradition from the early Middle Ages to the Reformation, reached its climax with the great controversialist theologian Robert Bellarmine. Although Bellarmine's ecclesiological formulation reflects the abiding influence of traditional notions, the theological precision and clarity with which the author formulates his thinking--especially in regard to the juridical and institutional nature of the church, outside of which there is no

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1Walden, The Concept of the Church in Recent Roman Catholic Theology (Ph.D. Dissertation: Yale University, 1975), pp.43-44.


3Because of its clarity and systematization, Bellarmine's *De Controversiis* dominated Catholic thought for centuries. Its ecclesiological views won over both dogmaticians and canon lawyers, and were to be repeated in textbook after textbook and manual after manual for more than three hundred years after his death (Walden, p. 45; Congar, L'Eglise, p. 374).

4Following the traditional insistence on the institutional visibility of the church, Bellarmine defined it as "the congregation of men bound by the profession of the Christian faith and by communion of the same sacraments, under the rule of lawful pastors and specially of the only vicar of Christ the Roman Pontiff . . . visible and palpable as are the assembly of the people of Rome, or the kingdom of Gaul or the republic of Venice," *De Controversiis*, I. 4. 3. 2, 10; quoted by Jay, 1:203. This formula, as generally noted, comprises three basic elements: profession of the true faith, communion of the sacraments, and submission to the Roman Pontiff (see
salvation,\(^1\) and his view of external and sacramental membership on
on the church,\(^2\) offers a significant view of the notions that

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B. C. Butler, The Idea of the Church [Baltimore: Helicon, 1962], p. 39; McBrien, Do We Need the Church? p. 104; John A. Hardon, "Robert Bellarmine's Concept of the Church," in Studies in Medieval Culture [Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 1966], p. 120; Dullies, Models of the Church, p. 20). Bellarmine's ecclesiological judgment not only reduced the body of Christians to a co-extension with the baptized members of the Catholic Church, but logically implied a wholesale condemnation of the larger part of the human race. As Manzanera remarks, this was precisely the dominant notion in Spain and Portugal at the time of the great geographical discoveries (Salvacion y Liberacion, p. 96). Commenting on Bellarmine's definition of the church, Gutierrez sharply observes, "Se identifica la conversion con la incorporacion a la Iglesia visible; como nota curiosa e importante, podemos observar que como condicion de pertenencia a la Iglesia no se exige la caridade" (Cristianismo y Tercer Mundo, p. 38).

Bellarmine cites the axiom 'extra ecclesiam nulla salus and explains it in a fashion common in Roman Catholic circles until Vatican II. He introduces the qualification of being in the church in actuality [re ipsa], or in desire [desiderio]. De Controversiis (Milan: Natale Batezzati, 1858), 2. 76; cf. Jerome PI rheisen, The Ultimate Church and the Promise of Salvation (Collegeville: St. John's University Press, 1976), p. 30; see also Joseph C. Fenton, "The Meaning of the Church's Necessity for Salvation," AER 123 (1951):203-221. Although Bellarmine's teaching introduced an enlargement on the traditional interpretation, it hardly changed the overall picture. Salvation outside of the visible Catholic Church was still impossible, or at best problematic.

Within Christendom's framework, Christianity became a mass process, and the universality of the Church was envisioned in external and quantitative terms. Members of the Christian state were, at the same time automatically members of the Church (Bouyer, The Church of God, p. 60). Conversion was, thus, equated with incorporation into the visible church, a position held by prominent sixteenth-century theologians (see Thomas de Vio Cajetan, "De comparatione auctoris papae et concile," column 22, in Cajetan's Scripta Theologica, ed. Fr. Pollet [Rome: Angelico, 1936], 1, 142; Alphonsus a Castro, "De iusta haereticorum punitione," Lib. III, column. 24, in the Opera Alphonsi a Castro, column 1392, both mentioned by Joseph Clifford Fenton, "The Status of St. Robert Bellarmine's Teaching about the Membership of Occult Heretics in the Catholic Church," AER 122 [1950]:209). In this connection Bellarmine makes a startling declaration: "For to be said to be a

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dominated Catholicism during the sixteenth century, the great age of colonization and evangelization of Latin America.

Church of Colonial Christendom

Christianity came to Latin America in its Roman Catholic expression with the Iberian conquerors in the sixteenth century.

part of the Church in some degree, I do not consider any interior virtue is required but only an exterior profession of faith and participation in the sacraments, things which our sense of perception can confirm." De Controversiis, 1. 4. 3. 10; quoted by Jay, 1:203, emphasis supplied. This notion of purely external church membership paved the way for the reliance of the Catholic Church on the ruling powers in the process of evangelization of Latin America with grave social implications.

With the reforms set in motion at the Council of Trent it can be concluded, that the ecclesiological notions that had gradually taken over Catholicism became official dogma. Such conceptions not only became official but also strongly defended (Walden, The Concept of the Church, pp. 43-44), and taught more or less everywhere for the following three hundred years (Marie Dominique Chenu, "Vatican II and the Church of the Poor," in The Poor and the Church, ed. Norbert Greinacher and Alois Müller (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), p. 56.

Iberian discovery and conquest have been so often narrated that only a brief summary is needed. Latin America was penetrated and colonized by Spain and Portugal, the two dominant powers of Europe at the end of the fifteenth century. The Spaniards arrived in the Caribbean region in 1492. Believing that they had reached the coast of India, they gave to the islands the name which they have wrongly borne ever since—The West Indies. The Portuguese, in the course of their overseas expansion, reached Brazil in 1500. Spain, as Catholic as Portugal, but more powerful, had the advantage in the arbitration of the Spanish Borgia Pope, Alexander VI, who in 1493 issued the bull Inter Coetera, dividing the New World between the two powers. Although the bull did not satisfy Portugal, it was morally and juridically adequate to ratify the Spanish title to the Indies. Latorre Cabal, The Revolution of the Latin American Church (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), p. 4. For the history of conquest and colonization of Latin America see, Hubert Herring, A History of Latin America, from the Beginnings to the Present (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1968); Salvador de Madariaga, The Rise of the Spanish Empire (New York: Macmillan Co., 1947); E. Bradford Burns,
Catholic missionaries, priests, and friars of the Franciscan and Dominican orders followed in the tracks of the colonizers and the conquest of Latin America quickly became a missionary enterprise, considered "one of the most important events of the whole history of Christian expansion."¹

As one might expect, the type of church established in the New World was hardly more than a 'transplantation' of that current in Western Europe, the so-called "Mediterranean Church."² Discussing the model of the church extended to Latin America through the Iberian powers, Thomas C. Bruneau remarks that "this model is best characterized by the term Christendom,"³ a conception that had been

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¹ Justo González, Historia de las Misiones (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1970), p. 140. Christopher Columbus himself regarded his discovery as a miracle achieved in fulfilment of an Old Testament prophecy (see S. A. Mackay, The Other Spanish Christ [London: Student Christian Movement, 1932], p. 42). It was even believed by some that the discovery of the Indies, except for the creation of the world and the incarnation and passion of Jesus Christ, was the greatest event in history (see Julián Juberías, La Leyenda Negra. Estudio acerca del conceto de España en el extranjero [Madrid: Editorial Nacional, 1974], p. 86).


³ Thomas C. Bruneau, The Political Transformation of the Brazilian Catholic Church (Cambridge: University Press, 1974), p. 11. The church which came to Latin America was, in fact, an extension of
dominant in Western Catholicism from the early Middle Ages.

Although in most parts of Europe the Protestant-Reformation brought into crisis the traditional Church-idea and the particular relationship between Church and society which logically flowed from it, the old Catholic conceptions remained intact in Portugal and Spain, the two countries promoting the counter-Reformation and engaged in exploring the new lands. Spain, particularly, "unaffected by the reformers preferred to go its way at home and in its


New World colonial possessions.\(^1\)

With the discovery of the new territories a limitless mission field suddenly opened up. Unfortunately, the missionary movements stimulated by the great discoveries of the sixteenth century seem to have had little effect on Catholic ecclesiological notions. As M. J. Le Guillou asserts, "The missionary idea did not reach the Church. It did not renew the different chapters of ecclesiology."\(^2\) At the precise moment when a new vision of the Church and innovative

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\(^1\)John P. Dolan, Catholicism (Woodbury, N. Y.: Barrons' Educational Series, 1968), p. 156. The arrival of Spaniards and Portuguese in the continent opened a new horizon to European Christendom, which was in a process of fragmentation in the larger part of the Old World (see Mario Gongora, Studies in the Colonial History of Spanish America [Cambridge: University Press, 1975], pp. 33-55; Bruneau, p. 12; Manzanera, Teologia y Salvacion, p. 99; Dussel, "The Expansion of Christendom, Its Crisis and Present Moment," in Tensions Between the Churches of the First World and the Third World, ed. Virgil Elizondo and Norbert Greinacher [New York: Seabury Press, 1981], p. 41). Some churchmen even incorporated the discovery of the New World into eschatological theories. According to chiliastic interpretations, the Kingdom of Christ, ruled through the King of Spain, and the Pope would be established in the Indies, after being expelled from Europe by the heresies (see Gongora, "The New World in Eschatological and Utopian Writings of the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries," in Studies in the Colonial Spanish America, pp. 206-245. Although these interpretations are sometimes ambiguous, they seem to indicate that the discovery was seen by both Spanish-Portuguese ruling powers and Catholic hierarchy as the opportunity to bring to earth the old dream of the "Christian Kingdom" the Christendom utopia (Jose Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979], p. 5).

\(^2\)Marie-Joseph Le Guillou, "Mission as an Ecclesiological Theme," in Rethinking the Church's Mission, ed. Karl Rahner (New York: Paulist Press, 1968), p. 82. Overly concerned with the Counter-Reformation and influenced by its compartmental view of the world, the Catholic Church was not able to go beyond its old conceptions. That the Church was not aware of the new situations created by the discovery is revealed by the fact that at Trent the council fathers hardly mentioned the overseas territories.
missionary ideas were needed, Counter-Reformation "fearfully closed off all possible experimentation."^1

Catholicism in the new territories thus retained traditional notions regarding the nature and mission of the Church. Rigidly institutionalized, absolutist in its claims, and extremely defensive, the Christendom Church transported to the New World and left intact there, unavoidably tended to reproduce in colonial lands a faithful version of its Spanish and Portuguese counterparts, decisively marking not only the type of evangelization to be carried out in the continent but also the social formation that resulted from the impact of the Iberian Catholic colonization.

**Ecclesiology, Missiology and Social Implications**

Taking into consideration the special relationship between ecclesiology and missiology,^2 one may conclude that the development

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^1 Conways, p. 19. With the discovery of the new lands by the Spanish and Portuguese the Catholic Church had an opportunity to be enriched not only quantitatively but qualitatively as well. "The transition from a culturally confined church to a genuine world Church might have begun also at this time, but it did not." Richard McBrien, Catholicism (Oak Grove: Winston Press, 1981), p. 541.

of Catholic activities in Latin America was foreordained from the outset by the way the Church perceived itself.

It was conceiving itself as the juridical and absolute center of the work of salvation—the embodiment of the civitas Dei, over against the civitas diaboli, which included all outsiders, among them the pagans to whom the kingdom of God should be extended—that the medieval Roman Catholic Church reached the New World. The rationale behind its missionary endeavors in the new lands was in itself a result of the absolutist conception of its nature, expressed in the traditional formula extra ecclesiam nulla salus.

Consistent with this ecclesiological vision, the colonial notion of mission likewise had an ecclesiocentric focal point,

1Within this perspective, Küng notes, crusades [against the infidels] as well as missions [to the pagans] could be seen as an extension of the kingdom of God (The Church, p. 128). In fact, for many theologians and canon lawyers in Europe, the discovery of Latin America was a continuation of the idea of the crusades, that is, of extending the kingdom of God to the infidels. And as David M. Traboulay points out, "it was not easy to convince Europeans that the new infidels were different." "Christianity and the Struggle for Justice in the New World," ZMissW 59 (1975): 96. Therefore, the conquista of the New World became a war against paganism, just as the reconquista had been a war against Islam—it was waged for the faith.

2By the time of the discovery and evangelization of the New World, Catholicism strongly advocated the idea that there was no salvation outside of the Catholic Church (Manzanera, Teología y salvación, p. 96). It was precisely this conviction that inspired the indefatigable zeal of the Catholic missionaries in the new territories. Their attempt to rescue the heathens from damnation (Dunn, p. 52), or as it was expressed in a prayer attributed to St. Francis Xavier, the 'Apostle of the Indies,' to avoid that "se llenasen de infieles los infernos" (Manzanera, ibid., n. 15), reflects the anxiety of the church to baptize as many infidels as possible.
defined according to institutional categories. The main concerns were thus often reduced to the establishment of the visible Church with all its functions and institutions, considered the normal way of salvation—and quantitative vision of ecclesial expansion, through the incorporation of vast numbers of people into the church's fold, the only place where salvation could be realized.

Such concepts would inevitably and directly affect the rela-

1 Since there was a relationship of equivalence, if not identification, between Jesus and the church, as Torquemada had emphasized, "the Head [Jesus] cannot be separated from the body [the church]" (Summa de Ecclesia, lib. I, cap. XLIII, cited by Journet L'Église du Verbe Incarné, 2:123), the presence of the institutional Church in the midst of human society became an imperative, Ubi Ecclesia, ibi Christus (see Vittorio Subilia, The Problem of Catholicism [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964], pp. 121-124). Prisoner of this vision, the Colonial church, was overwhelmingly concerned with its institutional life (Jorge Pantelis Reino de Dios e Iglesia en el Proceso Historico de Liberación [Ph. D. dissertation: Union Theological Seminary, 1975], p. 2-10); see also Pierre Charles, Les Dossiers de l'Action Missionnaire (Louvain: Editions de L'Aucum, 1938), p. 34.

2 The Church of Christendom was fundamentally marked by this notion of quantitative extension. Its organizational principle was that of total coverage of all territories where people could be found. Regnum and sacerdotium were in charge of ensuring conversion, even if this meant the imposition of religion through force (Bruneau, p. 11), a view common in Spanish tradition (see above p. 27, n. 3). In Latin America, Spanish Catholicism following traditional notions expressed an overriding concern for quantitative accomplishment. The Franciscans. In a letter written shortly after their arrival on the continent, reported 3000 baptisms. Erwin Iserloh et. al, Reformation and Counter Reformation, 6 vols. (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 5:578. Discussing the missionary activity as one of the numerous marks of the true Church, Bellarmine refers to "many thousands of heathen" entering the Church in the New World (cited by Stephen Neill, A History of Christian Mission [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964], p. 227). The Indians were baptized en masse, as were the slaves from Africa before they landed in their new homeland (Bruneau, p. 11). In his description of the Catholic missionary enterprise in the New World during the colonial period, Donald Coggan notes that
tions between the Church and the civil society in which it existed. Transformed into a "Christendom," as Chenu remarks, the Church branched out into temporal institutions which became the necessary and preferred channels of pastoral action. In this solidarity between the 'spiritual' and 'temporal' powers, the ruling classes placed civil institutions at the service of the Church. At the same time, these forces succeeded in enlisting the Church in the service of amplifying, consolidating, and legitimizing their rule.

"Twelve Franciscans arrived in Mexico in 1526; within thirty years there were three hundred and eighty of them, together with two hundred and ten Dominicans and two hundred and twelve Augustinians. It was claimed, with what validity or accuracy it is impossible to say--that within about half a century of the arrival of the Franciscans some five million natives had been baptized." Coggan then goes on to add, "But before we get too excited about these achievements we must remember that the crown was the power behind the church, and conversion was an element of the conquest. Force, cruelty and greed all had a share in the process of 'conversion'." Mission to the World (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), p. 52.

To accomplish the missionary task involved in its institutionalist ecclesiology, the Catholic Church came to rely on the powerful classes and a conquering evangelization was then realized through a lasting solidarity between the church and the ruling powers (see Góngora's discussion of the "military mission" which took place in Spanish America, pp. 40-43)

1"Vatican II and the Church of the Poor," p. 57.

2It should be noted that the colonial notion of mission was not only dependent upon the theological understanding of the church but also upon a psycho-anthropological conception which expressed itself in such phrases as the "white man's burden" and "manifest destiny" (see Dolesh, p. 89). Colonizers and missionaries, as Dunn notes, brought with them the conviction that they were superior in race, culture, and religion to those whom they colonized (Missionary Theology, p. 25). The superior/inferior relationship in the colonial situation, looked upon as "natural," became permanent. Furthermore, the sociocultural impact of being placed in an inferior position curtailed in the colonized people any energetic effort toward change and development.
If the Christendom conception prescribed a particular fusion of religious and political categories, this blend of church and temporal powers was nowhere so complete as it was in Spain. "To think Spain," as C. Branden says, "was to think Roman Catholicism."\(^1\) It is noteworthy, however, that in the movement from Europe to Latin America, this unity, mediated by the system of the Real Patronato,\(^2\) took on particular characteristics which intensified the sense of...

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\(^1\) Charles Branden, "Church and State in Spain," ChH 3 (1934): 207. For over four hundred years the Catholic faith had been identified with the struggle to liberate the Iberian peninsula from the Moors. By the time of the final defeat of the Moors and the discovery of the New World in 1492, a permanent link had been forged uniting Spanish imperial aspirations and the cause of Catholicism. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that this pattern should be impressed upon Latin America at its foundation (Dennis P. McCann, Christian Realism and Liberation Theology [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981], pp. 133-36); see also Mackay, The Other Spanish Christ, pp. 2-41; Dussel, A History of the Church in Latin America, p. 387.

\(^2\) The Patronato was "the fundamental institution of colonial Christendom" (Pablo Richard, "Iglesia Popular, A Church Born of the People's Struggle," in The Church at the Crossroads [Rome: IDOC International, 1978], p. 111). The Spanish and Portuguese crowns financed and gave military support to the Catholic evangelization, but they also reserved for themselves many canonical rights. In speaking of the Patronato, J. Lloyd Mecham observes that "never before or since did a sovereign with the consent of the pope so completely control the Catholic Church within his dominions... [this control] was not confined to ecclesiastical persons and temporalities but even encroached upon the sphere of purely spiritual matters... the king... exercised quasi pontifical authority." Church and State in Latin America (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1961), p. 43; for a comprehensive treatment of the patronage and analysis of its causes and evolution, see W. Eugene Shiel, King and Church: The Rise and Fall of the Patronato Real (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1961). The rights granted through the Patronato were so extensive (see Mecham, pp. 3-37) that soon various Spanish theologians, in the New World as well as in the old country, developed the theory of the Vicariato Regio, which claimed...
Latin American Catholicism and the ruling classes

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¹Charles Branden, "Church and State in Spain," ChH 3 (1934): 207. For over four hundred years the Catholic faith had been identified with the struggle to liberate the Iberian peninsula from the Moors. By the time of the final defeat of the Moors and the discovery of the New World in 1492, a permanent link had been forged uniting Spanish imperial aspirations and the cause of Catholicism. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that this pattern should be impressed upon Latin America at its foundation (Dennis P. McCann, Christian Realism and Liberation Theology [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981], pp. 133-36); see also Mackay, The Other Spanish Christ, pp. 2-41; Dussel, A History of the Church in Latin America, p. 38).

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complementarity between the colonial enterprise and the evangelization of the continent.¹

To assure its security and to fulfill the mission prescribed by its conceptual understanding of the nature of the church, Catholicism turned to the ruling powers, which in turn received from the church legitimation for the colonial quest for wealth and power.²

that the king was the vicar of the Pope in the New World. See Antonio de Engaña, La Teoría del Regio Vicariato español en Indians (Rome: Analecta Gregoriana, 1958). As C. H. Haring points out, "the power exercised by the crown under the Patronato Real made the Church in a very real sense another branch of royal government, another means of political control" (The Spanish Empire in America, 182). In this ascendency of the Iberian kings over the Church, Bruneau notes, "the Christendom form took on the features of Caesaropapism" (p. 13).

¹The intimacy of the relationship between colonizers and evangelizers was such that, in the mind of both Hispanic political leaders and the Catholic hierarchy, colonization and evangelization were conceived as one single project (see Bailey W. Diffie, Latin American Civilization, pp. 245-247, 256-260). "Hispanization" became synonymous with Christianization, and evangelization became colonization. This synthesis was mainly possible because, as F. Campo notes, Catholic missionaries "justificaron la conquista de América de acuerdo con las ideas del Augustinismo Político y del concept de Cristiandad para lograr la evangelización de los Indios," EstAug 13 (1978):527.

²For detailed discussion of the economic exploitation of the New World by the conquistadores, see Diffie, Latin American Civilization, pp. 104-164; Haring, The Spanish Empire in America, pp. 252-334; Harold E. Davis, History of Latin America (New York: Ronald Press, 1968), pp. 116-124. Although the essayist and historian Salvador de Madariaga wants to read Spanish economic affairs in the new lands in a more positive light (The Rise of the Spanish American Empire, pp. 54-67), it seems evident that domestic and international trade, manufacturing, agriculture, and especially mining were regulated in the interests primarily of the peninsulares, who made themselves and their monarch wealthy. George Pendle holds that the stream of gold and silver from the New World flooded Spain to the extent that it had disastrous effects, mainly stimulating inflation (A History of Latin America, p. 66; Dussel "Domination-Liberation: A New Approach," Conc 19 [June 1974]:33-37; Dussel's A History of the Church, pp. 45-467.)

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In this process the church even provided theological justification for the colonial exploitation of the Indians, black slaves, half-breeds and mestizos.1 To carry on its program the church was


Despite the vigorous opposition of some churchmen against the cruel dominion of the Spanish conquistadores, as in the case of Fray Antonio de Montensinos and Bartolomé de las Casas (see Lewis Hand, The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1959); Dussel, A History of the Church, pp. 47-61; David M. Traboulay, "Bartolomé de las Casas and the Crusade of Peace," ZMissW 61 [1977]:128-136; also Traboulay's "Christianity and the Struggle for Justice in the New World," ZMissW 59 [1975]:94-111; Gutiérrez, "En busca de los pobres de Jesucristo: evangelización and teología en el Siglo XVI," pp. 137-160), the church generally justified the situation of oppression. For theologians and members of the clergy and religious orders the Indians were persons of lower rank, and violence and coercion was the single method to bring them to Christianity and civilization. This idea was mainly defended by the Catholic theologian, Juan Gines de Sepúlveda. Sepúlveda, a renowned champion of the Spanish conquest,
supported, protected, and given special privileges, having at its disposal all channels of organized society: legislation, education, access to authority, and power. But it had to pay for it by total and unconditional support of the governing authorities. In this concordat the church served as an agency of colonial expansion, a key

relying on Aristotle's axiom that all lower forms of created life should be subject to higher forms (see Aristotle Politics, in The Works of Aristotle (Chicago: William Benton Publishers, 1952), pp. 447-448; Lewis Hanke, Aristotle and the American Indian (London: Hollis and Carter, 1959), took a metaphysical leap and concluded that the Indians as a race were grossly inferior to the Spaniards, hence suited to be their slave, in order to be evangelized and raised to the "higher" level of Spanish humanitas. See Sepúlveda's work, Democates segundo: o, de las justas causas de la guerra contra los indios, ed. Angel Losada (Madrid: Instituto Francisco Vitoria, 1951); John L. Phelan, "The Problem of Conflicting Spanish Imperial Ideologies in the Sixteenth Century," in Latin American History: Select Problems, ed. Fredrick B. Pike (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), pp. 47-52; Venáncio Carro, La teologia y los teologos juristas españoles y la conquista de America (Madrid: Instituto Francisco Vitoria, 1944), p. 493. This doctrine, convincingly defended by Sepúlveda was a theological justification for the oppression of the Indians by the Spanish conquistadores who rationalize their hunger for a cheap and abundant supply of Indian labor (Gutiérrez, Bartolomé de las Casas: libertad y liberación, Paginas 2 (1976): 41-49; also Manzanera, Teologia y Salvacion-Liberacion, pp. 81-82).

The decline of the Indian population forced the colonists to turn to African slaves to satisfy the demand for cheap labor. A series of papal bulls promulgated between 1452-1456, authorizing Portuguese expansion, had already explicitly encouraged the enslavement of pagan people "inimical to the name of Christ," C.R. Boxer, The Church Militant and Iberian Expansion 1440-1456 (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 30-38; Daniel Rops, The Catholic Reformation, p. 256). Furthermore, the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, served as an arsenal of texts in support not only of the validity of slavery and of the slave trade but also of color prejudice (Boxer, p. 36). Except for some members of the clergy who devoted their lives to the service of the slaves, "the church's attitude to Negro slavery was, to put it politely, a highly permissive one for nearly four centuries" (Boxer, p. 30); E. Dussel,"Church-State Relations in Peripheral Latin American Formations," EcR 29 [1977]:32; see J. Saco, Historia de la esclavitud de la raza africana en el nuevo mundo (Havana: Cultural, 1938)).
institution of social control,\(^1\) and the basis of the amazing pax of the Hispano-American empire.

The result of the symbiotic relations between the Church and the ruling powers was not only a process of "totalization" but also the transformation of Catholicism into an ideology that defended and sacralized the social and economic structure of Latin America, whose formation sprang from the impact of the Spanish colonial enterprise.\(^2\) Allied with the rich and powerful, Catholicism in

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\(^1\)Through its orders, liturgy, symbolism and absolute emphasis on transcendental salvation, Catholicism pacified the colonized population. The Church controlled also the system of thought, being the sole official conduit of Latin education. Education, however, as Lawrence Littwin remarks, was parcelled out in inverse proportion to the size of each segment of society. To the nine-tenths at the bottom of the social pyramid was given only the necessary elements to produce docile workers, while the minority on the top had at its disposal all the splendor of medieval scholasticism. Latin America: Catholicism and Class Conflict (Encino: Dickson Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 29, 30. In the seventeenth century, with the introduction of the practice known as the limpieza de sangre, students had to present a certificate to prove that both of their parents were of pure Spanish stock. European education was thus limited to a very reduced social group, while the majority remained deprived of their old culture and of the new one. See John Tate Lanning, "Tradition and the Enlightenment in the Spanish Colonial Universities," Cahiers d'histoire mondiale 10 (1967):705-721; also Traboulay, "The Church and the University," 283-294, and "Christianity and the Struggle for Justice," pp. 103, 104.

\(^2\)As the New World opened its doors to the Old, the entire semi-feudal structure that existed in the Iberian Peninsula was extended to it. See Ronald M. Glassman, Political History of Latin America (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), pp. 80-82. This adaptation prescribed the two basic elements of social structure in Latin America: land ownership and class stratification. As a direct result of this semi-feudal society, a pattern was established which would cast a land shadow over the history of the continent (see Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology, pp. 4-7). Discussing the social spectrum of colonial Latin America, Francois Houtart and Emile Pin note that "at the top were the Spaniards, at the base the blacks and the Indians."
Spanish America wove itself into the fabric of domination, absorbing the worldview, values, and ideologies of the ruling classes. This coalition between the Catholic Church and its supporters formed the cement for the astonishing empire and static society that resulted from the colonial beginnings, a society in which the poor were greatly ignored\(^1\) and lived in a place carefully marked out by those in power.\(^2\)

The alienation of the poor

As a result of the theoretical distinction between the "spiritual" and the "temporal" which characterized the Christendom conception,\(^3\) the model of the church transported to Latin America

Between the two extremes, proceeding from the bottom to top: the mulattos, the Indians mestizos, or half-breeds, and finally the mestizos of Spaniard culture." The summit of the pyramid was occupied by the white Spaniards, members of the high governmental bureaucracy and of the high clergy (The Church and the Latin American Revolution, p. 13). For a pertinent discussion of the function of Catholicism in the genesis of social classes in Latin America, see Houtart, "Religion et lutte des classes en Amérique Latine," SocConp 26 (1979):195-260. This social and economic structure, based on the exploitation and violence by the minority over the majority, set the pattern for the life of the continent, and was inevitably to be perpetuated throughout the history of Latin America (see Lernoux, "The Long Path to Puebla," p. 5; cf. Malcolm Lowry, Under the Volcano [Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1965], pp. 299-300). Lawrence Littwin holds that Catholicism was the main agent in this process (Latin America: Catholicism and Class Conflict, pp. 13-37).


\(^3\)Although Christendom expressed itself as a monism, at the core of its conceptual frame was a clear distinction between the
was deeply marked by a striking and antithetical duality. Combined with the strong tradition of institutional stability, which led the church to branch out into the temporal order and resulted in an option for the rich supporters, there was a general downgrading of the importance of earthly life which reinforced an escapist spirituality. This tension between what C. Bauman calls "conquest of the world and flight from the world" reproduced in the new lands the traditional moral dualism of a two-level ethic, which implemented a double-edged alienation of the poor, and which we discuss in the two following sections.

The Option for the Rich

On one hand, conceiving itself as the possessor of the only "spiritual" and the "temporal." This distinction was precisely the principle of the unity of the two powers. Otto Gierke, The Political Theories of the Middle Age (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), pp. 9-11. The conception of the absolute superiority of the "spiritual" over the "temporal" justified the intervention of the Church in the temporal order, which corrupted by sin, depended for healing on the grace of which the Church was the sole depository (Manzanera, p. 91).

1Daniel H. Lavine, Religion and Politics in Latin America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 20-21. This duality was part of the classical theological framework and its two-storied, nature-supernature vision of the world, was conceived mainly under the influence of Greek thought and fully elaborated after the time of Thomas Aquinas (Lindbeck, The Future of Roman Catholic Theology, pp. 14-15; Redmond, p. 43). In this conception the Church was pictured as hovering between heaven and earth, half human and half divine, with interests divided on both sides of eternity.

2Clarence Bauman, "The Theology of the Two Kingdoms," p. 39. Bauman points out that in the Weltanschauung of the Middle Ages, the world and the Church, like nature and grace, constituted two coordinated quantities. The antithesis between the ethos of the world and the ethic of grace was resolved in terms of otherworldly counsels of perfection for the monastics, on the one hand, and this-worldly
absolute value and function in human history, the church of Christendom tended to become an end in itself, devoting its main energies and resources to institutional expansion and preservation.\(^1\) As a result it was led to rely on the temporal powers to achieve its goals, becoming a powerful partner of the ruling classes in the colonial enterprise. In such a psychological and juridical context, to use the words of Chenu, "it is obvious that the existence, the problems, the hopes and suffering of the poor, and even the evangelical paradox of the blessedness of poverty will not be in the forefront."\(^2\)

\(^1\)Posing the question whether the original Christian message was aimed at masses as such, so that it must be propagated in those terms, or rather aimed at minorities who were destined to play an essential role in the transformation and liberation of the masses, Segundo argues that the choice of one of these options determines whether the Church's energies will be allotted to institutional expansion and preservation or to the transformation of the world (The Liberation of Theology [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976], pp. 208-240). Assuming the first understanding, the Church of Christendom stressed the ecclesial universality through quantitative expansion. As a result it tended to become an end in itself, losing sight of all other problems of mankind (see The Community Called Church, pp. 45-49; Segundo's La Funcion de la Iglesia en la Realidad Roplatense, [Montevideo: Barreiro y Ramos, 1962], pp. 8-9; Persha, Juan Luis Segundo: A Study Concerning the Relationship between the Particularity of the Church and the Universality of Her Mission, pp.168-180).

\(^2\)Chenu, "Vatican II and the Church of the Poor," p. 57. In this context Chenu is discussing the results of the ecclesiology which dominated the thought of the Catholic Church over the last centuries. He goes on to point out that ecclesiologists of the traditional school "will of course remember the Gospel and its hard sayings against riches and power, and will be faithful to them; but such a sanctified view of things relates only to individuals on their route to perfection, not to the Church as a visible institution, to which there is no reason to apply such evangelic concepts as
In this complex situation, Latin American Catholicism lost sight of all areas of human life which fell outside its ecclesiocentric perception. It also, as Lernoux remarks in a rather severe criticism, sided with the elites and was transformed into a tool of colonization, being used to found and sustain the social pyramid in Latin America "with few, white Europeans living in outrageous luxury while the mass of the people subsisted in misery."¹ Becoming a part of the whole feudal structure set up during the first years of the conquest, the Catholic Church had its pattern of development practically foreordained. It became the Church of the elite.²

The fact that the church became linked with one part of society--the rich and powerful--made it impossible for it to identify with anyone who was not part of that privileged group.³ At the same

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¹Lernoux, p. 5; see also Littwin, pp. 29-30.
³The Church, evidently, never abandoned the poor in the sense that it always maintained its charitable works. It is impossible not to admire the courage and devotion of many Catholic missionaries. The Jesuits, for example, organized small Christian villages (reducciones), in which the Indians were taught and protected. Alfred

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time, the alliance of the church with the ruling and generally exploitative nobility was not without grave consequences for the Latin American Catholic community. It produced "a gradual alienation of the poor from the church and the priests who represented it." The poor, despite their religious feelings and commitment to popular Catholicism, as Miguéz Bonino notes, always felt the official church as something "foreign to them as a part of 'those above,' as

Metraux, "The Contribution of the Jesuits to the Exploration and Anthropology of South America," Mid-America 26 (1948): 193-191; Carlos Leonhardt, "Acción educadora de los Jesuitas españoles en los países que formaron el virreinato del Río de la Plata," Estudios 26 (1954):17-23, 115-131, 189-194, 268-80; Haring, pp. 198-206. For an extended account of the history of the Jesuits in the New World, written from a friendly perspective, see Francisco Xavier Alegre, Historia de la Compañía de Jesús en la Nueva España, 3 vols. (Mexico: Imp. de J. M. Lara, 1841-42). Furthermore, the Catholic clergy, particularly the Franciscans and Augustinians, created and managed, almost exclusively, all of the social services of the community such as hospitals, asylums and poorhouses to attend to the sick and needy (see Hering, 191-198). However, as Gross observes, the emphasis "almost always was on charity, almost never on responsibility" ("The Catholic Church in Latin America," p. 31). Catholicism in Latin America generally approached the poor from a paternalistic perspective, and consequently "it never became committed to forces working for social changes; indeed, it stood as a symbol of reaction, or caution--of domination" (Costello, Mission to Latin America, p. 22).

1Ibid.

2Since the beginning of the Catholic Church in Latin America, there has been a clear distinction between official Catholicism and popular Catholicism. The masses rarely accepted official Tridentine Catholicism, which was reserved for a small bourgeoisie. Popular religiosity always had its own vision, its own interpretation of the chief Catholic symbols and doctrines. See Phillip Berryman, "Popular Catholicism in Latin America," CrossCur 21 (1971):284-300. Vallier observes that among the causes of the deep cleavage that began to develop between the church and the "Catholic" religion was the hierarchy's fusion with the ruling classes ("Religious Elites," pp. 191-192). Dussel also has attempted to interpret Latin American popular Catholicism within the framework of colonial Christianity in
popular speech calls the small oligarchy who decides their destiny."\(^1\)

**Escapist spirituality**

At the same time, flowing from the particular conception of the Church we have noticed, there was a tendency to separate the religious from the profane.\(^2\) Since the Church alone possessed decisive and absolute value, the profane and temporal history of man became stripped of real significance.\(^3\) This vision tended to minimize the light of the dominance and dependence present throughout the history of the continent. See A. Bunning, ed. El Catolicismo Popular en la Argentina, 5 vols. (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1969), vols. 4 and 5; Dussel Hipotesis para una Historia de la Iglesia en America Latina (Barcelona: Editorial Nova Terra, 1967); also Comblin, "El Cristo de la fe y los Cristos de America Latina" (Vispera 9 [1969]: 158; and Miguez Bonino, "Popular Piety in Latin America," in The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith, ed., Claude Geffre and Gustavo Gutiérrez (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974), pp. 148-157).

\(^1\)Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 7. Elsewhere Miguez Bonino notes that this was not only a Latin American phenomenon "most of the poor in the Western world eventually left the Church" ("Poverty as Curse, Blessing and Challenge" IllifR 34 (1973):5. The poor felt uncomfortable and even out of place in the Church; they became suspicious of the official rules and practices of the Church, and started seeing the church as the administrative arm of 'religion' to which respect should be paid, but they didn't feel they belonged to it (see Fernando Costillo, "Christianity Bourgeois," pp. 51-60).

\(^2\)Segundo, La Funcion de la Iglesia, p. 41; Persha, p. 102.

\(^3\)F. Copleston holds that this tendency to disregard life in this world goes back to Augustine himself. According to him "one would hardly expect, once given the general attitude and complexion of Augustine's thought, to find the Saint showing very much interest in the material world for its own sake: his thought centered round the soul's relation to God." A History of Philosophy, 5 vols. (Westminster: Newman Press, 1962), 2:74; for a contrary reading of Augustine in this point, see Rowe, St. Augustine, pp. 120-121. It seems, however, that it was the Scholastic interpretation of Augustine's as well as Thomas Aquinas' view of God and man, nature
earthly life, with a concomitant tendency to treat this world as merely a stage on which eternal principles are played out in preparation for "real life" beyond, outside history.

This tendency to separate the natural from the supernatural was greatly reinforced by the emergence of the "pure nature" theory at the beginning of the sixteenth century, a view which produced a sharp dichotomy between human nature and divine grace. Fully developed it drove an ontological wedge between the orders of nature and super-nature, seeing the latter as "a sort of second storey carefully placed on the top of lower nature by the heavenly Architect." The "pure-nature" doctrine, destined to dominate Western Catholic theology and Christian spirituality for centuries,

and grace, that drastically accentuated the dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural, and divided life into natural concerns, which lie within man's own competence, and supernatural ones, in which he is aided by grace.

1The pure-nature doctrine, the origin of which is attributed to Cardinal Cajetan's misinterpretation of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of nature and grace, in an attempt to safeguard the gratuitous quality of the supernatural order completely separated the natural and supernatural, human nature and divine grace. This notion, conceiving the supernatural as fundamentally alien to man, strongly reaffirmed the temporal-spiritual and profane-sacred antitheses (see Juan Alvaro's study of the theological development of the pure-nature doctrine from Aquinas to Cajetan, Lo natural y lo sobrenatural: Estudio histórico desde Santo Tomas hasta Cayetano (1274-1534) [Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1952]; Henry de Lubac, Le Surnaturel: Etudes historiques [Paris: Aubier, 1947]; also de Lubac, The Mystery of the Supernatural [New York: Herder & Herder, 1967] and Augustinianism and Modern Theology; J.K. Kenny, "Reflection on Human Nature and the Supernatural," InSt 14 [1953]:280-287; H. Rondet, "Le problème de la nature pure et la théologie du XVI siècle" RecherchesRel 35 [1948]: 401-521).

decisively contributed to increase the traditional attitude of distrust towards the world, and reinforced the reduction of salvation to its supernatural and eschatological dimensions.¹

In consequence of its captivity to medieval ambiguities and vision of Christian spirituality,² the type of Catholicism transported to Latin America was deeply marked by a negative vision of the world which, given the additional emphasis on the Augustinian notion of 'original sin,' was considered the place of punishment and inevitable suffering.³ Furthermore, salvation was understood

¹Manzanera, Teología y Salvación, p. 92; Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 69.

²In the medieval period, Christian spirituality was reduced to passive contemplation, described as "the tranquil dwelling of man in the presence of God" (see Karl Rahner and H. Vorgrimler, Concise Theological Dictionary [New York: Herder and Herder, 1965], s.v. "Contemplation"). It had a strongly metaphysical orientation, neglecting bodily, historical and temporal realities, and looking strictly to "religious" values, such as prayer, meditation and the transcendent dimensions of Christianity. See Louis Bouyer, The Spirituality of the Middle Ages (London: Burns & Oats, 1968). One of the best expressions of this emphasis is found in the classical The Imitation of Christ and Contempt for the World, a manual of spiritual devotion which appeared early in the fifteenth century, traditionally attributed to Thomas à Kempis (c. 1380-1471), with "countless editions and translations in almost every language" (Bouyer, p. 437). This book is marked by a negative evaluation of temporal realities. The world in its vision is fundamentally a temptation to concupiscence. It pictures the ideal Christian life as characterized by peace and solitude, in which the Christian, liberated from the flesh-spirit dualism, experiences complete suppression of the fleshly and worldly in favor of the spiritual, the concentration of energy in one's own inner life, and complete indifference to earthly realities. This tradition pervaded Spain, the 'land of the mystics' by the time of the discovery, colonization and evangelization of Latin America (see Bouyer, The Spirituality, pp. 532-543).

³Throughout Latin America, Catholic missionaries propagated an asceptic theology, which Riolando Azzi calls the "teología del destierro" ["the exile theology"]. "La teología en el Brasil."
mainly within a one-sided emphasis on extra-historical, spiritualist, transcendent, and individualistic dimensions completly divested from any historical and social meaning, having little to do with real life on this earth, and ultimately meaning salvation from history. Highly 'spiritual,' Latin American Catholicism, conditioned by the "mystical" and "otherworldly" traditions of the Hispanic church, came to neglect the needs of the real world, being, as Gross remarks,

Consideraciones históricas," in Historia de la Teologia en America Latina, ed. Pablo Richard (San Jose, Costa Rica: Departamento Ecuménico de Investigaciones, 1980), p. 46. Within the philosophical and theological conception of Platonic Augustinianism, extreme emphasis was given to the doctrine of original sin. The physical world and secular history were seen not as the world which God loves and redeems, but as the place of man's exile and punishment for the sin of the first parents, thus religiously unimportant. Present life does not have meaning in itself. It is only a time of waiting for eternity, which is the real life. This negative perspective of reality was widely accepted during the colonial period and, as a justification for common situations of injustice and suffering, the poor were told that such conditions were the fruit of the original sin (see, for example, the work of the Jesuit Jorge Benci, first published at the beginning of the seventeen century, Economia Crista dos Senhores no Governo dos Escravos [Sao Paulo: Grijallbo, 1977], p. 77). Each one, therefore, must bear his fate in resignation without trying to change "God's will" (Azzi, pp. 46-47). This sober notion of the inexorability of suffering is well expressed in the words of the famous medieval prayer Salve Regina, which virtually reduces life to despair and the world itself to a "vale of tears."

1 The duality between the natural and supernatural orders not only created the conception of two histories, one profane and one sacred, "juxtaposed" or "closely linked," each with its own path (Henri de Lubac, The Mystery of the Supernatural, pp. 1-47). It also implemented the reduction of salvation to the supernatural realm, producing a severe dichotomy in the Christian life. Temporal activity, in this conception, had only extrinsic value and was significant only when in relation to supernatural salvation, which came to be understood preferentially in an individualistic, spiritualistic, moralistic, and sacramentalist way (Manzanera, pp. 90-94, Lindbeck, pp. 12-13).
"constitutionally incapable of seeing the reality of the world around itself."\(^1\)

This tendency, reinforced by the syncretic elements of the pre-Columbian and African (through the slaves) civilizations incorporated into the Latin American folk Catholicism, transformed the Catholic religion into a message of fatalism.\(^2\) Spanish Catholicism, therefore, was prevented from becoming incarnational or sufficiently interested in humanizing the prevalent conditions. It became a religion of bells, images, sacramental liturgy, Latin mass, and processions—the religion of the Blessed Virgin and the saints. Catholicism in Latin America, as Emile Pin notes, became the "religion of suffering,"\(^3\) a theme dramatically expressed in Latin

\(^1\) Gross, p. 29

\(^2\) In this fatalistic vision, everything in human life was attributed to God's will—"Dios lo quiere"—a belief that became deeply rooted in the soul of the poor people in Latin America, and as E. Barra remarks, led to a religious alienation greatly useful to the purposes of the ruling classes (E. Barra, Le Context de la théologie de la libération [Paris: CERIT, 1974], pp. 62-65). It not only tended to remove the notion of secondary causes, but also stimulated a posture of accepting things as they were, reaffirming tendencies to submit to fate and to adjust to circumstances, thus rejecting existential confrontation with a potentially manipulable world (see Emile Pin, Elementos para una Sociología del Catolicismo Latinamericano [Fribourg, Switzerland: Oficina Internacional de Investigaciones Sociales de FERES, 1963], pp. 49-50; Littwin, p. 9). Thus, in this "popular providentialism," as Lernoux remarks, "poverty is a condition of birth, not something that can be changed by individual or collective endeavour. Like the estate owner or distant dictator, God must be appeased through the intercession of the saints, who are bribed by offerings and prayers to help average Latin Americans get through their lives of misery in the vague hope of some better hereafter. On earth at least, all is preordained: born poor, die poor" ("The Long Path," p. 5; cf. Burns, Latin America, p. 63).

\(^3\) Pin, p. 50.
American Christology and its typical manner of symbolizing Christ, the dying and bleeding crucified Savior. The "powerless man of the crucifix," a vision deeply absorbed and incorporated into the Latin American conscience, greatly contributing to shape a society characterized by an immense ability to endure suffering.

Finally, poverty, traditionally regarded by Catholicism as a

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1Arias, "Contextual Evangelization," p. 20; see also Vallier, Catholicism, Social Control, p. 28. In his study of Latin American Christology, Saul Trinidad lists five images of the Spanish Christ which were propelled into the New World: (1) Christ as an innocent child adopted by his protectors; (2) a conquered and suffering Christ; (3) Christ of the "mysteries," possessing magical powers especially in the sacraments; (4) Christ as "celestial monarch," rich and powerful, adorned with gold, like the masters and lords of the New World; (5) a nonviolent, nonexploitive Christ of benefaction, kind and paternal, a "philanthropic monarch" using the tactic of love to win conversion but still legitimating the dominance and exploitation of the conquest. "Cristología-Conquista-Colonización," in Cristianismo y sociedad (Buenos Aires: Tierra Nueva, 1975), pp. 12-28. In the diversity and complexity of these images, some proved more appropriate for the oppressors and some for the oppressed. The oppressors, in order to justify the domination, presented a Christ victorious, the distant and terrible monarch (Juan Marcos Rivera and Moisés Rosa Ramos, "A Reflection from the Context of the Latin American Church, in Mission in Dialogue, ed., Mary Motte and Joseph R. Lang (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1982), p. 158). The poor, on the other hand, were overwhelmed by the Christ portrayed in the first two dramatic roles: the infant in his mother's arms, the defenseless and inoffensive Christ, and the suffering and bleeding victim, the humiliated and utterly defeated Christ. In these two connections, as Mackay observes, Christ was born and died, but never lived (The Other Spanish Christ, p. 110), thus lacking humanity. This conception contributed to what Comblin calls an "iconization" of the life of Christ (Théologie de la révolution: Théorie [Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1970], p. 236). Assimilated into an icon, Christ lost His human reality. He was rarely associated with life and living problems. In this "Christology of resignation," the impotence of the oppressed was interiorized as inevitable, and not only functioned to sacralize the system of oppression, but also greatly contributed to create the passive and conformist Latin American poor (Azzi, pp. 49-50) forever weak and in constant need of protection by "benefactors."
virtue, was presented by the missionaries as a Christian ideal. Lernoux remarks that the bishops used to tell the people that they should be "grateful for their poverty, because such a condition merited Christ's special love." This idealization of poverty, as Gutiérrez notes, opened the door to all kinds of equivocations.


2Lernoux, p. 6.

3Gutiérrez, "The Praxis of Liberation and the Christian Faith," LumVit 29 (1974):385. This must not, however, obscure the fact that the willingness to accept poverty in accordance with the original purpose and meaning of the "poverty movement" brought Catholic missionaries of the Franciscan, Dominican and Jesuit orders in the Old World as well in the New into close identification and practical solidarity with the poor. See Julio de Santana, Good News to the Poor (Lausanne, Switzerland: Imprimerie La Concorde, 1977), pp. 81-94; Gutiérrez, "En busca de los pobres de Jesucristo," pp. 137-163.
Furthermore, traditional dualist interpretation of poverty: actual poverty, which was literal material deprivation, and habitual poverty, meaning poverty "in the mind," in "spirit," in "intention"--not in material fact--provided the basis for an ideological use of the gospel. According to this conception, the actual poor were blessed because they would eventually inherit heaven, so they need not worry about their present situation. On the other hand, to use Dussel's language, the "oppressors, the rich of Christendom,"¹ being "poor in spirit" or in "intention," were also "blessed," and eventually would also be saved. They could then justify themselves to their own consciences. In this situation, as Miguez Bonino concludes in a tone of irony, "true doctrine was honored and everybody was satisfied. Or should be."²

The Church at the End of the Colonial Era

The church's coalition with the ruling classes and parallel alienation of the poor was reaffirmed in the course of the nineteenth century. At the time of the outbreak of the independence movement,³ in the early part of the century, the church initially

²Ibid., p. 5.
³In the first part of the nineteenth century, Latin America witnessed the outbreak of civil wars and the rise of nation states. This period of decolonization, rooted in complex and interrelated historical causes, progressively worked away at the hitherto homogeneous society within the continent. At this stage colonial Christendom entered into a long and profound process of
attempted to retain the colonial situation. Not only did it strongly react against the independence aspirations, it also sought to give theological bases for the traditional order. Unable to prevent the changes, however, it ended by allying itself with the new dominant class, now represented by the rulers of the emerging nations the Creole aristocracy, which in exchange for political support, offered decomposition. Dussel discusses this period under the heading "Agony of Colonial Christendom," A History of the Church in Latin America, pp. 75-136.

1See L. J. Michan, Church and State in Latin America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1934), pp. 3-88; also F. B. Pike, ed. The Conflict Between Church and State in Latin America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964). Through its acknowledged spokesmen the church sided with 'loyalist' forces, regarding the insurgent nationalists as heretics and "rebels against divine authority" (Kirk, Liberation Theology, pp. 4-14).

2During this period Latin American Catholic seminaries and universities were teaching the doctrine of the "derecho divino de los reyes" ("divine right of kings"). This "monarchist theology," which demanded from the clergy as well as from the people complete acceptance of the kings and their government, was based on literal exegesis of texts from the Old and New Testaments, as well as on patristic authorities (for details and bibliography, see J. Manuel de Ferrai and Maximiliano A. Salinas, "Las ideas teológicas en Chile," in Historia de la Teologia en America Latina, pp. 109-111; also in the same book, "Juan German Roscio: La teologia del triunfo de la libertad sobre el despotismo," p. 192). The Vatican expressed strong disapproval of the independence movements in two encyclicals: Etsi longissimo (1816) and Etsi Iam Diu (1824); see Kirk, Liberation Theology, p. 5.

3Dussel observes that "the church, which was linked hand in glove with the monarchy during the colonial period, became closely tied to the new Creole and later bourgeois oligarchies of the New Latin American countries" (A History of the Church, p. 77). Although the men who waged the wars of independence were imbued with the ideas of European Enlightenment, their religious attitude, as Kirk notes, was avowedly Catholic (p. 7). The new leaders needed the church in order to justify their actions. Thus the independence hardly changed the bases of religion's relations to power. Evidences indicate that the majority of the new governments wanted to maintain the special

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the church protection and gave it status.

By the middle of the century, however, the church came under fierce attack of free-thinking politicians, or "liberals." Attracted by the teachings of European rationalism, their opposition to the church as well as their anticlericalism became a political philosophy. At this stage, unable to respond to the challenge of the time, the church began to take a back seat if not simply fade out of the picture.

Progressively, opinions were polarized between conservatives and liberals. Liberals, concerned with progress and material development, sought to give to the lower classes a chance to rise in social status. They saw as an all-important part of this ideal the necessity "to instill in the citizens materialistic incentives, competitive instincts, and the capitalistic drives associated with the position which the Catholic Church enjoyed vis-a-vis the State, merely transferring the privileges of patronage from Madrid to their own hands (Kirk, pp. 3-8).

1Its most consistent base was Positivism (see Leopold Zea, The Latin American Mind [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963], pp. 223-232, 241-253), which imposed itself and became dominant in Latin America between 1870-1890 (Dussel, History and the Theology of Liberation, pp. 104-105). Since Positivism proposed the sovereignty of reason and was hostile to metaphysics and theology, it became a weapon to liberal intents (see Zea, ibid., pp. 164-171).

2In their attempt to make changes on the continent, the liberals came to see the Catholic Church as an obstacle to reform. The Chilean leader Bilbao summarized the tensions between the old religion and the new ideals, affirming that "either Catholic theocracy or Republicanism must triumph" (quoted by Zea, p. 50; see also Kirk, p. 13; Mechan, "A Survey of the Church-State Conflict in Latin America during the First Century of Independence," in The Conflict Between Church and State in Latin America, pp. 164-171).
individualistic pursuit of wealth.\(^1\) The Church, on the other hand, siding with the conservative party—namely, the Creole aristocracy—still under the influence of the pure-nature doctrine,\(^2\) placed emphasis on non-material spiritual rewards for the masses. It espoused the social philosophy of paternalism,\(^3\) with the fundamental notion that the natural social order called for the existence of "an immobile lower class permanently entrusted with the meaner occupations," whose members "were not expected to rise within the social order, for any endeavour on their part to do so would threaten the providentially-established hierarchical order."\(^4\)

Dominated by its traditional Church-centered vision,\(^5\) the

\(^1\)F. B. Pike, "The Church in Latin America," in The Church in a Secularized Society, p. 323. It should be noted that the Catholic idea of social and economic stratification as a natural fact and consequent view of poverty almost as a creational order, finds its best expression in Leo XIII's famous encyclical "Rerum Novarum" (see below, p. 74, n. 3).

\(^2\)Manzanera, p. 100.

\(^3\)This conception basically proposed that the government should supply the needs and regulate the conduct of the governed on the assumption that this was the best way to secure their highest welfare (Pike, "Church in Latin American," pp. 325-329). To the liberals, paternalism was an encouragement to idleness and prevented the inculcation of competitive capitalistic values among the masses, and thus retarded economic progress. It was precisely influenced by this understanding that the liberals sought to deprive the Church of its wealth so that it could no longer carry out its charitable and social welfare programs.

\(^4\)Ibid., p. 328.

\(^5\)During the nineteenth century there emerged within Catholicism especially in Europe, a theological movement which under the influence of liberal Catholicism attempted to lead the Church to abandon its state of siege mentality and get down to the task of finding a more positive relationship with modern secular culture.
Catholic Church, overly concerned with its security and convinced that it could only fulfill its mission if and when the cultural and social structures were placed at its service, reaffirmed the traditional coalition with the economically and politically powerful groups as the best possibility for retaining its traditional influence. Miguez Bonino summarizes well the situation:

The Church, unprepared for a culture in which it would have to gain its place in society through direct persuasion and influence naturally sought support in those groups and parties which offered the possibility of extending the traditional forms of influence; it became both dependent and allied with the conservative parties made up of the rich landowners and the old Spanish aristocracy.1

This tactic evidently required a constant flirting with the quickly changing secular authorities and an ad hoc, problem-solving policy which prevented the church from developing a long-range

This attempt, however, faced its first setback with Pope Gregory XVI's encyclical Mirari Vos (Aug. 30, 1832), which thundered denunciations against liberal doctrines. This intransigence was further hardened by the following Pope, Pius IX, who voiced a final "no" to the liberals in his encyclical Quanta cura to which he attached the famous Sillabus Errorum (1864), closing the door to any possibility of change. For a pertinent discussion of the topic see Mark Schoof, A Survey of Catholic Theology 1800-1970; see also Aubert, The Church in a Secularized Society, pp. 3-203; Thomas Bokenkotter, A Concise History of the Catholic Church, pp. 301-326. In Latin America, enlightened priests wanted also a renewal of the Church, characterized by a return to the primitive Church of the first three centuries, mass in the vernacular, a return to the Scripture, reform or abolition of the Curia, decentralization of papal power and a 'poor' Church; however, this trend was denounced to Rome by the Spanish loyalists as the "most bizarre impiety," and the movement vanished (Kirk, p. 6). At the First Vatican Council (1869-1870), traditional ecclesiological thought prevailed and the Church officially remained the same for almost another century.

1Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 9; see also I. Vallier, "Religious Elites," p. 194.
strategy, not to mention the means for reaching the people.\(^1\) The result was a reinforced alienation from the poor. In the words of Costello, this new alliance with the rich parties "further widened the chasm which already separated it [the church], from the masses and, in fact, made it all but unbridgeable."\(^2\) The Catholic Church became estranged both from the peasant and the emerging workers' classes, "who clung to their traditional folk-Catholicism coupled with a profound mistrust and hostility toward the hierarchic Church."\(^3\)

The "Distinction of Planes" Model

The decline of the Colonial Christendom conception under the fires of Latin American liberalism to a great extent muffled the life of the Roman Catholic Church in the continent, which during this period was increasingly characterized by a reinforced defensive posture and withdrawal syndrome.\(^4\) The economic crisis of 1929, with


\(^{2}\)Costello, p. 24.

\(^{3}\)Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 9. Despite Pope Leo XIII's encyclical Rerum Novarum (1891), expressing the concern of the Church for social justice, the Latin American Church "lagged behind, castigating incipient labor movements as socialist and immoral" (Lernoux, p. 6). In 1899 Leo XIII convoked the first general meeting of the Latin American hierarchy, in Rome. But as Costello remarks, "no single dramatic change resulted" (p. 26). Encased in its traditional institutional rigidity, Latin American Catholicism was unable to affirm its identity as the champion of social justice, and this, as Bishop Manuel Larrain of Talca, Chile, says,"has been among the most unfortunate consequences for the church" (cf. p. 24).

\(^{4}\)During most of the nineteenth century, Roman Catholic theo-
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its profound repercussions in Latin America, however, was a hard blow to the anti-Catholic and anti-clerical class. As they lost power, "Catholicism gained breathing space." The breakdown of the militant opposition marked for Catholicism "the end of a long period of powerlessness" and the beginning of overtures toward the traditional conservative Catholic Church, which would enable it to carry out a remarkable reconstruction. It marked the beginning of what Pablo Richard considers somewhat excessively as the "golden age of the Latin American Church."

Exhibiting a different theological mentality, Catholicism was now able to suggest a new answer to the classic question of the relation between the church and the world, Christianity and human existence, faith and social reality. In reaction to the Christendom model, which had left secular reality subordinate to the church's interests, Catholic liberalism sought some freedom for society

ology in Latin America was "conservative neocolonial theology on the defensive" (E. Dussel, "The Political and Ecclesiological Context of Liberation Theology in Latin America," in The Emergent Gospel: Theology from the Underside of History, ed., Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella [Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1976], p. 176). The grave crisis faced by Catholicism in the nineteenth century was not only a Latin American phenomenon. In Europe as well, the corpus of revolutionary thought stemming from the Enlightenment greatly affected the vitality of Catholic theology. During this period, as Schoff notes, theology, the queen of sciences, "bore the crown but could not impose her will" (A Survey of Catholic Theology, p. 21).

1Dussel, History and the Theology of Liberation, p. 106.
2Comblin, The Church and the National Security State, p. 52.
through a new approach, epitomized in the "New Christendom model".  

If Augustinian theology predominated in the Christendom approach, Thomism did so in the New Christendom. Under a renewed understanding of Thomas Aquinas' teaching of grace and nature, it was possible to overcome the ontological dichotomy between the natural and supernatural orders imposed by the pure-nature doctrine. It also became possible to affirm the consistency of the natural-human, which implied a certain autonomy for man's temporal activities. The theological assumption behind the New Christendom model was a clear distinction between the "temporal" and the "spiritual," a distinction of planes, in which the Church and the world are autonomous entities with their own respective goals. Since

1See Fierro, The Militant Gospel, pp. 47-75; Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 54-56; Dussel, History and the Theology, pp. 106-107; idem, History of the Church, pp. 106-116; Lernoux, pp. 6-9.

2Aquinas' notion that grace does not suppress or replace nature but perfects and sustains it, opened the door to possibilities of a more autonomous and disinterested political action (Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 55). For a detailed study on Aquinas' teaching on grace and nature, see de Lubac, The Mystery of the Supernatural. For a brief treatment of the topic, see René Laurentin, Liberation Development and Salvation (Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis Book), pp. 55-57.

3In the Christendom model, since the profane sphere was not regarded autonomous, Christian participation in temporal tasks meant to work for the benefit of the Church. In the New Christendom model, however, with the autonomy of the temporal sphere asserted, the meaning of "Christian politics" would not flow directly from religion or the defense of Church interests (Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 55).

4The Church should not interfere in temporal matters except through moral teaching. "The layman," Dussel notes "was responsible for everything temporal, worldly, material and political; the priest was the 'spiritual man,' the vicar of the Kingdom of Christ" ("The Political and Ecclesial Context," p. 117). This function was largely
the Church was limited to the supernatural order, it should renounce any direct action in the temporal sphere in order to defend its interests. Furthermore, the Church was no longer responsible for constructing the world. This function was left to the Catholic layman, now called to assume the task of creating "the city of man," and to search for a society inspired by Christian principles as well as based upon justice and human brotherhood.

During this period, significant efforts were made to revitalize Catholicism throughout a continent deeply disturbed by economic and social tensions.¹ Under the influence of the social teachings of Pius XI,² the Latin American Roman Catholic Church implemented the

¹The impoverished continent was witnessing the dissemination of radical ideologies (Pike, "The Church in Latin America," p. 347), especially a considerable increase in Marxist influence (Redmond, p. 32).

²Under Pius XI (1922-1939), Catholic concern for social justice experienced a renewal. The encyclical Ubi Arcano (1922) encouraged the creation of the Catholic Action groups for open participation of the laity in the social sphere. Pius XI's social concern is particularly expressed in his encyclical Quadragesimo Anno (1931), which not merely focused on the condition of the poor but also paid attention to the basic causes of injustice and poverty (see Donald Dorr, Option for the Poor [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983], pp. 57-75). Furthermore this encyclical, contrary to Rerum Novarum, speaks of social mobility as something desirable, suggesting that the poor could change their plight. Quadragesimo Anno was considered so innovative that "even the relatively progressive Chilean Church of the early 1930s withheld . . . [its] . . . publication" (Conway, p. 19).
Catholic Action movement, seeking "to awake the social conscience of the upper classes and to induce them, under the Church leadership, to take paternalistic measures aimed to mitigating the material suffering of the masses."²

Though in the "distinction of planes" model the church was no longer, at least theoretically, characterized by political involvement, the traditional Catholic ecclesiological convictions remained basically unaffected.³ Gutiérrez observes that in the New Christendom approach, the Church still regarded itself as "the center of the work of salvation"⁴ and remained characterized by a "certain narcissism."⁵ The emphasis was still on the visible and institutional church, hierarchically structured, whose mission was the protection of faith and the communication of extra-historical salvation. Bound to such

¹Catholic Action groups organized in Latin America during the 1930s offered the novel appeal of encouraging lay people to take co-responsibility for establishing a "new Christendom" in the continent, through labor, politics, and cultural activities (Pike, "The Church in Latin America," p. 347); Vakemans, pp. 23-26).


³This is clearly evident in the so-called "Spanish Summa," or Sacrae Theologiae Summa, a seminary textbook composed mainly by Spanish Jesuit theologians and widely in use throughout the Catholic world during the years preceding Vatican II. The treatise on the Church "De Ecclesia Christi," prepared by the distinguished ecclesiologist Joaquim Salaverri, considered by McBrien as "the most sophisticated and academically serious preconciliar exposition of the mystery of the Church" (The Remaking of the Church, p. 27) betrays an exceedingly ecclesiocentric vision (McBrien, Catholicism, pp. 659-661, 711, 712). See also the work of the Jesuit Sebastian Tromp, Corpus Christi Quo est Ecclesia (New York: Vantage Press, 1960).

⁴Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 55.

⁵Ibid. Even the attempt to create a just and democratic
intra-ecclesial notions, under the shadow of a long tradition of close unity with the dominant classes, and increasingly facing the criticism of those who were struggling to transform the society in which it was deeply rooted, the church was led to reinstate its traditional selective political involvements. As it had happened many times in the past, the church's concern for the poor was lost in its effort to preserve its own influence and goals.

Mingled with this ecclesiological perception there were also other theological factors which tended to reinforce the practices that flowed logically from the traditional understanding of the Church. Dominated by the twentieth-century pre-conciliar Catholic static world view, the church was led to emphasize the permanency society through lay people was to a great extent motivated by an ecclesiocentric concern. Such an effort was seen as a pre-evangelization work, intended to achieve conditions favorable to the activity of the Church in the world (McBrien, The Remaking, pp. 8-9; Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 55). Moreover, when some of the social-action groups, aware of the political dimensions of social problems, engaged themselves in the political arena, often taking stances contrary to the official positions and interests of the Church, the latter reacted in defense of conservative postures (see Gutiérrez, "The Praxis of Liberation and the Christian Faith," LumVit 29 [1974]: 377-381; A Theology, pp. 63-66). The Church was, in fact, denying in practice the theory of the "distinction of planes" which postulated its non-involvement in temporal affairs.

1 Dussel, "Current Events in Latin America," p. 78. Hardly surprising, for liberation theologians the "New Christendom," which stressed the autonomy of the temporal sphere with regard to the Church,"only masked a tacit alliance of the Church with oppressive regimes" (Alfred T. Hennelly, "Courage with Primitive Weapons," CrossCur 28 [1978]:13; Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 65). To many, even the Catholic Action movement whose basic purpose had been to establish social solidarity in the continent, seemed like most European imports, to be "directed primarily at the small core of upper-class Latin American whites, ignoring the majority of the people who were poor" (Lernoux, p. 7).
and fixity of theological truths expressed in its teachings. Consequently, it tended to absolutize traditional conservative postures, generally condemning alternative views in social questions. In addition, relying on the Thomistic meaning of justice, the Catholic Church showed a persistent tendency to relate social justice to "peace" (i.e., absence of strife and controversy) and "order" in society, an understanding that tended to de-emphasize justice and supported the political order of the status quo and the institutions which preserved that order.

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1On this see Christine E. Gudorf, Catholic Social Teaching on Liberation Themes (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980), pp. 6-20; also Gudorf's "Historical Change and Conceptions of Justice: Papal Social Teaching 1922-77," UnionSQR 23 (1978):99-100.

2Gudorf, "Historical Change," pp. 92-93. In his documents relating to social teachings, Pius XI, for example, underlined the traditional belief in the permanency of truth. For him, the Church possessed the whole eternal truth (Divini Illius Magistri, AAS 22 [1930]:55), and its teachings contain these truths as "eternal," "unchanging," and "unchangeable" (Quadragesimo Anno, AAS 23 [1931]:183; Divini Illius Matistri, AAS 22 [1930]:83). This understanding is precisely the basis for the Church's claim to be a perfect society, and the leader of all other societies" (Ubi Urcano, AAS 14 [1922]:689-690; Gudorf "Historical Change, p. 91). Thus, as the "master of truth," the Church, it was believed, holds the key to peaceful and happy social relationships, which in the tradition of Rerum Novarum was based on the notion that man must accept unequal social conditions. Besides, this inequality is, if not necessary, good, it thus being natural to have rich and poor, ruler and ruled, employers and employees (Rerum Novarum, art. 14; cf. Seven Great Encyclicals [Glen Rock, NJ: Paulist Press, 1963], p. 8). Furthermore, since there is no way to change this situation (to make the poor believe that their condition can be changed is a deception), classes are called to collaborate, (RN, 15). As a natural consequence, these conceptions generally tended to sacralize social stratification. See Jean Guichard, "Class Struggle and Proclamation of Salvation," in Liberation Theology and the Message of Salvation, ed. René Metz and Jean Schlack (Pittsburgh, PA: Pickwick Press, 1978), pp. 79-100.

3See Gudorf, Catholic Teachings, pp. 1-5; 21-45; Pierre Bigo,
The Church and Developmentalism

During the 1950s and early 1960s Latin America was generally described as an "underdeveloped continent," a qualification that attempted to explain the desperate situation of its countries in terms of lack of "an efficient bureaucracy, a modern technology and a growing industrialized economy." The picture, however, that emerged from a report of the United Nations in 1952 expressed Latin American reality in darker colors: two-thirds of the population were physically under-nourished, in some areas to the point of starvation. One half of the people were suffering from infectious or deficiency diseases. About one-third of the working force was subsisting outside of the social and cultural fringes of the Latin American community. An overwhelming majority of the agricultural population was landless, and most of the extractive industries were owned or controlled by foreign corporate investments, with a considerable part of the profits being drained from Latin America.2

That something should be done was obvious, but no one seemed


2United Nations, Informe preliminar sobre la situacion social del mundo (New York: U. N. Publications, 1952). That the situation did not change in any significant way during the following decade is evident in Marcos Kaplan, "Economic Aspects of the Latin American Crisis," in Conscientization for Liberation, pp. 242-266.
to know precisely where to start. Then, the early 1960s marked a turning point in Latin American history. Three figures, Premier Fidel Castro, President John F. Kennedy, and Pope John XXIII, epitomized the expectations and options for a new era in the continent. Castro and Kennedy, representing fundamental political alternatives for the future of the hemisphere, raised hopes that traditional patterns could be broken in favor of social justice. Castro's successful revolution in Cuba proposed a radical change in the distorted economy of neocolonialism. It involved the abolition of class differences and the socialization of all productive wealth. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, on the other hand, followed the strategy of development summarized in U Thant's axiom with which he inaugurated the First Development Decade, "Development = economic growth + social change."

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1 This period witnessed the emergence of various institutes of religious sociology, as reflected in a confusing number of acronyms: CERIS, DESAL, IBEAS, DESEC, ICLA, ODUCAL, etc. (Richard, "Liberation Theology and Current Politics," p. 35). In 1955 the bishops formed CELAM (Conselho Episcopal Latino-Americano). All these new institutions were seeking solutions to the chaotic situation of the continent.

2 Dennis McCann, Christian Realism, p. 136.


4 U Thant, Toward World Peace, Addresses and Public Statements 1957-1963 (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1964), pp. 152-193. Gutierrez observes that this period "was marked in Latin America by great optimism in the possibilities of achieving economic development" ("A Theology of Liberation," TS 31 [1970]:137). Underdevelopment, viewed as a stage prior to development, was to be overcome by a strong push
By this time, "development" was on everyone's lips. Richard remarks that "the plan of developmentalist neo-Christendom entered into a triumphalistic euphoria and showed an aggressively anti-socialist character." The developmentalist theory was paralleled by a developmentalist theology in which the Church endorsed the assumption that gradual change in the economic and social context could be achieved without the disruption of present structures.

The Latin American Catholic Church as well as the entire continent was by this time standing on the threshold of its historic destiny. Both were facing a critical hour and exploring the options before them. The Catholic Church, by its passivity toward social responsibility, had to some extent paved the way for the difficult times it was increasingly facing. An overly spiritualized religion was able to exist without challenge in a static society, which Latin

toward growth. For this, capital and technology were to be supplied primarily by multinational companies and foreign financing of needed purchases. J. B. Libanio, "Celam I II: Fears and Hopes" CrossCur 28 (1978): 20; also W. Roston, The Stages of Economic Growth, A Non-Communist Manifesto (Cambridge: University Press, 1960).

^Lernoux, p. 8.


America was for several centuries. Yet, when it came to face the harsh realities and the challenges of a restless society, conflict emerged. The people began to perceive the Church as having been there for four centuries without making any significant contribution to the improvement of conditions.¹

Precisely at this juncture the third figure, Pope John XXIII, called for an ecumenical council (1962-1965) to update the Church's relation to the modern world. On the very eve of Vatican II, the Brazilian Bishop Helder Camara warned that "the problems facing the Church in Latin America must have priority over all others. There is a grave danger that the people of Latin America may cease to be Catholic or even Christian."²

The Changing Picture

With structures inherited from a distant past encouraging its

¹Gross, "The Catholic Church in Latin America," p. 31. During the latter part of Pius XII's pontificate it became clear that all was not well with Latin American Catholic Church, so much so that a cardinal said: "When the Pope thinks of Latin America in the evening, he cannot sleep that night." Walbert Bühlmann, The Coming of the Third Church (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1978), p. 15. By the end of the fifties, Catholicism was progressively losing ground among Latin Americans. Protestantism and Marxism were making significant inroads in rural and urban poor communities throughout the continent. Emilio Núñez, "Liberation Theology in Latin America," BibSac 134 (1977):349. The Church was increasingly facing criticism for its traditional support of the established order and unjust social and economic institutions. Latin American Christians, Segundo says, "suddenly and unexpectedly see their church serving, in fact, the interests of an inhuman structure." De la sociedad a la teología (Buenos Aires: Editorial Carlos Lohlé, 1970), p. 150.

²Cited in Gross, p. 28. In the opening words of an article published a few days before the first session of Vatican II, L. Gross observed: "The Roman Catholic Church in Latin America is in trouble.
identification with the rich and ruling classes and the whole tradition resulting from it, one could hardly see how the Church could shift sides and "reconvert" to the service of the poor classes. Yet, striking changes started to occur. In the early 1960s, the universal Catholic community began to move slowly into a new direction, starting a process that would eventually deeply affect the entire life of Latin American Catholicism.

The Catholic Church was increasingly facing the fact that the Christendom era was over. The special relationship between the Church and Western culture, its privileged position in society, and the mutual support provided to each other by Church and State were seen as outmoded conceptions. The old institutional, hierarchical, and sacramental concepts of the Church, facing a world that was ever making less sense of religious values, were in jeopardy. In this context, it was realized, the Church could not exist with its traditional absolute claims. Its mission could no longer be seen as the christianizing of the world or the quantitative integration of people into a sacrament-dispensing churchly institution. Hardly surprising, John XXIII, in one of the earliest public expressions of his intention to summon a Council, articulated his conviction that

No stranger to challenges, it faces an unprecedented one today. Before most Church members now alive are dead, there will be as many Catholics in Latin America as in the rest of the world combined—or there will be few, if any, Latin Americans left in the Church" (ibid.).

With his Encyclical Mater et Magistra (May 15, 1961), John XXIII (1958-1963) started a new era in the social teachings of the Catholic Church. Although he did not commit the Catholic Church to an "option for the poor" in the sense that this expression came to be
the Council would be an event "that ought to move heaven and earth."  

Vatican II and the Church of the Poor

The ecclesiological formulations of Vatican II officially marked a considerable departure from the traditional post-Tridentine conception of the Church. Thus, Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, begins by describing the Catholic Community as "a kind of sacrament." The second chapter of the document speaks of

adopted in later times, he publicly and clearly put the weight of the Church on the side of a policy of social reforms in favor of the poor and deprived. From this time on a concern for the poor began to pervade John XXIII's documents, arousing the dormant conscience of the Catholic world. See Dorr, Option for the Poor, pp. 87-116.


Bonaventure Kloppenburg considers that the post-Tridentine ecclesiological conceptions "lasted officially until November 21, 1963," when they were rejected by John XXIII in agreement with the majority of the Council Fathers. The Ecclesiology of Vatican II (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1974), pp. 4, 11. More cautiously, however, McBrien stresses that although Vatican II advanced the Catholic conception of the church, it "did no break completely with the Ptolemaic perspective" (Do We Need the Church, p. 151. McBrien devotes an entire chapter in this book to discuss "The Residue of Church-Centered Theology," pp. 152-166).

Lumen Gentium is regarded as the centerpiece of Vatican II, not only because it is the first full-orbed conciliar exposition of the doctrine of the Church in Catholic history but also because it is the fundamentum of the other fifteen documents of the Council. An English translation of Lumen Gentium can be found in W. E. Abbott, The Documents of Vatican II. This source book places Lumen Gentium rightly at the head of all the conciliar documents.

Lumen Gentium, art. 1. On the concept of "sacrament" as applied to the Church, see Schillebeeckx, Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), pp. 47-54.
the Church as "People of God," and it is not until the third chapter that it raises the question of structures and authority.¹ This very sequence, in which the church as a community precedes the church as a hierarchical institution, is revealing.² The traditional post-Tridentine framework ceased to be the determinative criterion. In the mind of the Council, the Church is not primarily an organizational institution and societas perfecta or a static structure, reaching by its hierarchy, as it were, pyramidal into heaven. It is primarily a community, a pilgrim people still laboring in imperfection.

This shift of emphasis from the hierarchy to the whole community, epitomized in the phrase "People of God,"³ implied a new vision

¹Although the Copernican revolution in Catholic ecclesiology emerged in the official decisions of Vatican Council II, the theoretical bases for many of these changes were products of theological currents already at work. Especially since World War II, a systematic shift in the theological doctrine of the church had been occurring under the influence of a new generation of Catholic theologians, men such as Congar, Rahner, Schillebeeckx, de Lubac, and Küng, representatives of Catholic Progressive Theology. (For a brief discussion and bibliography, see McBrien, Catholicism, pp. 662-666; for more extensive treatment, see Walden, The Concept of the Church in Recent Roman Catholic, particularly chaps. 2 and 3).

²The ecclesiological implications of this sequence are perceptively noted by Congar, "ainsi l'ontologie de la grâce ou la réalité de l'existence chrétienne était posée en sa priorité et sa primauté à l'égard de l'organisation sociale ou de la structure jurique" (l'Eglise, p. 473; see also McBrien, The Remaking, p. 44).

³For an analysis of this image which is the principal paradigm of the Church in the documents of Vatican II, see Congar, "The Church: The People of God," in The Church and Mankind, ed. E. Schillebeeckx (Glen Rock, N. J.: Paulist Press, 1964), pp. 71-37; M. Hoffmann, pp. 198-208, and Dulles, Models of the Church, pp. 57-67). Hébert Roux notes that while introducing in its ecclesiology the basic notion of the Church as "The People of God," a priestly and messianic people called to point prophetically to the kingdom, Vatican II nevertheless failed to renounce its classic conception of
of the Church, "horizontal" instead of "vertical," dynamic rather than static, evolutionary not ahistorical. It envisaged the Church as something mutable, historically conditioned, and subject to the ups and downs of historical influences, in via not in gloria, thus in direct dialogue with the world.¹

As Congar observes, "S'affranchissant de la préoccupation obsédante du pouvoir, du prestige, d'une définition juridique des rapports plus ou moins concurrentiels entre pouvoirs, Vatican II a renouvelé la façon d'aborder la relation entre l'Eglise et le Monde."² That the ecclesiological principles of the Council were clearly oriented to the service of the world and its struggles for justice and dignity is evident, especially in the "Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the World," Gaudium et Spes, significantly the longest of the documents of Vatican II.³ The

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¹See Lindbeck, The Future of Roman Catholic Theology, pp. 33-38. Congar notices that "la notion de peuple de Dieu convenait aussi pour exprimer l'historicité (et donc l'imperfection, la réformabilité) d'une Eglise qui 'entre dans l'histoire des hommes' et y avance dans l'itinéraire même des hommes" (l'Eglise, p. 474).

²Congar, l'Eglise, p. 474.

³Abbott, pp. 199-316. Gaudium et Spes declares the Church to be in, for, and open to the world, not above, against, and closed to it (see Jay, The Church: Its Changing Image, 2:102; also Robert McAfee Brown, "Response" at the end of Gaudium et Spes in Abbott's ed., pp. 309-316.

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Council Fathers advocated an opening to the world and urged the Church to scrutinize the signs of the times, to share in the agonies of modern man so as to make the gospel credible, especially to the poor and suffering.

Chenu points out that the ecclesiological shift from the concept of an authoritarian Church to that of the Church as the people of God in a community developing from the mystery of Christ, naturally awoke in the Council Fathers a new sensitivity to the human and evangelical problems of poverty. In fact, according to René Laurentin, an expert on Vatican II, one of the Council's greatest problems was "in the matter of the Church's becoming on a grand scale the Church of the poor."

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1 See the introduction to the Constitution by Father D. R. Campion (Abbott, pp. 183-198). Gaudium et Spes portrays the Church as "truly and intimately linked with mankind and its history," to modern society in its cultural, economic, and political dimensions (art. 1).

2 Gaudium et Spes, art. 4.

3 Ibid., art. 1.

4 Chenu, p. 58. Chenu remarks that the Council came to face the fact that, despite charitable work, "there is much truth in the received opinion that the poor receive little respect or support in the Church; there, as in society at large, they are a marginal group, and though they are certainly the objects of much praiseworthy charity, they are not acknowledged as sharing 'rights' in the name of social justice." It was perceived that the world of labor had come into being outside the Church, Chenu goes on, "and the Church still does not know how to push her way into this vast continent of humanity" (pp. 57-58); see also Gary MacEoin, What Happened at Rome? (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. 108-129; Yves Congar, Pour une Eglise servante et pauvre (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1963); Peter Riga, pp. 45-87; J. C. Baumont et al., Eglise et pauvreté (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1965).

5 Cited by Gauthier, Consolez mon peuple, p. 221. In his...
As a result of this emphasis, the concern for the poor emerged in many scattered references, particularly in the two major conciliar constitutions, *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes.* In Chenu's words the description the Church of the poor or the Church that is poor "sums up perfectly one feature of the face the Church sought to adopt at the Vatican Council in an effort to be true to itself and a livelier awareness of its true nature."^3

address just before the closing of the first session, Cardinal Lercaro Archbishop of Bologna argued that the Council would not shed light on the mystery of the Church, the "sacrament of Christ," without bringing up the "mystery of Christ among the poor." Hence he requested that priority be given to the preparation of the evangelical doctrine on the preeminent dignity of the poor. See the summary made by R. Rouquette, "De Rome et la chrétienté," Etudes 316 (1963):260-266.

^During the first session of the Council a study group, "the Church-of-the-poor group," was formed by several prelates (MacEoin, p. 112). This small but highly vocal international group developed the notion that the Church is "servant of the poor," at the service of the poor, and even the concept of the "Church of the poor." J. Comblin, "The Church in Latin America after Vatican II," LADOC 7:14 (Jan/Feb. 1977):6. By the time of the last session of the Council, bishops of the poor nations of the Third World had become increasingly active working both to reinforce the vision of the "Church of the poor" and to spell out the practical demands that follow from it. In the final session, Paul VI seemed to have contemplated publishing an encyclical on poverty. The plan came to nothing, but at Easter 1967, the encyclical Populorum Progressio appeared, to a great extent as a result of this development (Chenu, p. 61). It is generally agreed that Paul VI's audacious encyclical was directed specifically at Latin America (Lernoux, p. 9).

^Lumen Gentium refers to the matter of the poor sixteen times. One of the most significant references appears in art. 8, where in a carefully elaborated passage, the poor are discussed in a christological and ecclesiological context. Furthermore, at least fourteen references to the poor can be found in Gaudium et Spes. As Chenu notes, reference to poverty is implicit in every line of this Constitution, especially in the section on economic life (p. 59).

^Chenu, p. 56.
Vatican II represented a significant advance of the Church's social teaching, in many aspects superseding traditional notions. Evading the Thomist framework which characterized *Rerum Novarum*, *Gaudium et Spes* conceived peace not merely as absence of war. Nor did it defend any fatalistic and rigid concept of class structure. It even departed from the traditional emphasis of the Church on the rights of private property ownership. Contrary to *Rerum Novarum* and particularly *Gaudium et Spes* marked a relevant turning point for the Church's social doctrine. Quentin L. Quade, writing from a conservative perspective, argues that *Gaudium et Spes*, rather than a "ground-breaking," is only "a very intelligently done synthesis of traditional understandings." The Pope and Revolution (Washington, D. C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1982), p. 4. This analysis however, seems to miss the innovative character of the document, which even where it repeats the traditional teachings does so with an increased degree of authority and credibility. For a more positive evaluation of the contribution of *Gaudium et Spes*, see Dorr, Option for the Poor, pp. 120-124. For a helpful analysis of the social teachings of the Second Vatican Council in comparison with other Catholic traditions, see Rodger Charles and Drostan Maclaren, *The Social Teaching of Vatican II* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982).

Bound with Thomism, *Rerum Novarum* and the papal documents in its tradition up to the time of John XXIII were prone to identify social justice with social order and the institutions which preserved it, a notion that tended to consolidate the status quo (see above, p. 74). *Gaudium et Spes*, on the contrary, conceives real peace as built not merely on any order but on one to be brought into existence by the thirst of people for an ever more perfect justice (art. 78). It must be brought about by human commitment and effort (ibid.). It must be defended, renewed (ibid.), firmly linked to justice, and extended to the whole economic order (art. 83).

In its strong warnings against the "socialist threat," *Rerum Novarum* had affirmed that it is 'natural' to have rich and poor, rulers and ruled, employers and employees, and since such condition is an integral part of the natural existence of sinful man, nothing can change it (see above, p. 74, n. 2). Thus, it called the rich to generosity and the poor to "tranquil resignation."

Misreading Aquinas' teachings on the common purpose of goods
Quadragesimo Anno, which taught that people are obliged to give to the poor "out of what remains over" (superflua) after they have provided their needs, Gaudium et Spes strongly insists that people are "obliged to come to the relief of the poor and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods." Furthermore, Gaudium et Spes envisages the Church as committed to make the human family more truly human by proclaiming and fostering human rights, establishing

[which is primary and fundamental], and the individual appropriation [which comes on a secondary level as a means of guaranteeing the proper management of wealth] (ST 2-2 q.66, aa.1 and 2), Cajetan interpreted as private property what Aquinas called common purpose. Consequently, private property entered into Catholic tradition as primary and of divine right. Until recently the popes have maintained that the preservation of private property was of first priority in any solution of the social problem (see Rerum Novarum 4-12). For a stimulating discussion of this topic, see Gudorf, Catholic Social Teaching, pp. 112-165; also Laurentin, Liberation, Development & Salvation, chap. 6, "The Rights of the Poor," pp. 83

1The teaching that one is obliged to give to the poor out of one's superflua (Rerum Novarum art. 19 and Quadragesimo Anno arts. 50, 51, cf., ST 2a, 2ae q. 33, a. 6), as Dorr notes, gave rise to a distasteful type of casuistry, allowing the rich to calculate that they had no obligation to give to the poor until the normal status symbols of wealthy people had been acquired. In Dorr's view, instead of imposing a heavy obligation on the rich to help the needy, it offered a kind of justification for turning a deaf ear to the cry of the poor, on the grounds that one has to live up to one's social standing (Option for the Poor, pp. 128-129).

2Gaudium et Spes, art. 69. Vatican II posed the obligation to help the poor in conclusive and forceful terms. If Leo had evoked Thomas' authority to support his position regarding the obligation of giving to the poor out of one's superflua, the Fathers of Vatican II appealed to an even more ancient and honourable tradition, i.e., that of St. Basil, Lactantius, Augustine, St. Gregory the Great, etc. (see Abbott, pp. 278-279, n. 222-239).

3Gaudium et Spes, art. 40.

4Ibid., art. 41.
and building up human community, and the initiation of action for the service of all, especially of the poor.\(^1\) At the Council the Church even took a step towards the adoption of a prophetic role in matters of social justice. In a clear departure from tradition, a key passage of \textit{Gaudium et Spes} suggests a new basis for the relationship between the Church and political powers:

\begin{quote}
The Church . . . does not lodge her hope in privileges conferred by civil authorities; indeed she stands ready to renounce the exercise of certain legitimately acquired rights if it becomes clear that their use raises doubt about the sincerity of her witness or that new conditions of life demand some arrangement.\(^2\)
\end{quote}

With the ecclesiological shift that took place at Vatican II, the Catholic Church freed itself from its traditional ecclesiocentrism and was able to turn outwards toward the modern world, and even hinted at a partiality for the poor.\(^3\) However, since the Council was working on an agenda set mainly by the First World,\(^4\) its

\(^1\)Ibid., art. 42.

\(^2\)Ibid., art. 76. This determination of relinquishing privileges in order to retain freedom of witness, of judgment, and action was a decisive step toward the radical or prophetic conception of the church, and certainly a paradigmatic stance for the Latin American Church in the years following the Council (see Dorr, p. 138).

\(^3\)This does not mean that the Church was not concerned with the poor and with the suffering caused by poverty before the Council. Catholic social teaching is in itself an evidence contrary to this conclusion. From Leo XIII, the popes of the modern period have spoken at great length on the poor and poverty. For an overview of the concern of the Church for the poor in the pre-Vatican period, see Dorr, pp. 11-86. Vatican II, however, put some structural changes on the agenda and dealt with the poor with an increased degree of authority.

\(^4\)Generally speaking the Council represented the concerns and priorities of northern European theologians (Dorr, p. 119). Although
perspective could hardly be that of the masses of the world's poor. The Council Fathers wanted to "fix a steady gaze" on the poor, but in fact seemed to be looking at the poor from the outside.\(^1\) For this reason, precisely, "the Council does not have anything very inspiring to say specifically to those who are poor and powerless." Indeed, adds Dorr, "it speaks more about the poor than directly to them.\(^2\)"

Although the Documents of Vatican II attempted to discard the traditional 'escapist' spirituality of the poor, with its emphasis on poverty as something to be endured in the hope of future reward, and even rebuked the traditional split between faith and action,\(^3\) the Council's "option for the poor" is framed within the traditional

\(^1\)Gaüdium et Spes opens with a manifestation of solidarity with the poor: "the joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties . . . especially [of] those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ" (art. 1). This sense of solidarity, however, is no longer as evident in the remainder of the document.

\(^2\)Dorr, p. 131. Bühlmann observes that despite the Council's emphasis on the Church of the poor, it did not result "in any effective trend towards the Church of the poor" (The Coming of the Third Church, p. 120).

\(^3\)So severe was this dichotomy in the life of the Church, not only in Latin America but everywhere during the years preceding Vatican II, that it characterized this gap-mentality as "one of the
paternalistic vision (i.e., the poor as the object of charity and social service). Furthermore, there is no perception that the poor has anything to say to the theological method.

For these reasons, Vatican II, one might conclude, still seems to operate within the context of the "distinction of planes." The institutional Church and the laity, theology and social teachings remain separate. The Church is still an "order apart" and thus the Council did not recognize any difference between Christians working to alleviate poverty for the benefit of the poor and the church more serious errors of our age" (Gaudium et Spes, art. 43). Christians, the Council exhorts, must not "shirk their earthly responsibilities" (ibid.).

The concept of the "poor," in the Conciliar thought, Míguez Bonino remarks, "remains imprecise" ("Ecclesia Pauper, Ecclesia Pauperum en el Vaticano II y en la teología católica latinoamericana reciente," in Los Pobres [Buenos Aires: Editorial La Aurora, 1978], p. 141). The Council describes the poor as the "needy," the "suffering," the "weak," the "sick" (notions that can be applied to any level of existence). The poor, therefore, are seen as those in a condition of deprivation and not as a precise socio-economic category (ibid.).

See, in chapter 2, the discussion of liberation's theological method and the role of the poor in it. In his analysis of the Conciliar references to the "poor," Míguez Bonino concludes that for the most part these references are "superficial and periphrastic. There is no serious discussion of the theme: neither from the theological-ecclesiological perspective, as one would expect from Lumen Gentium, nor from a ethical-sociological perspective, as one would expect from Gaudium et Spes" (Bonino, ibid., p. 138). Although theologians such as Paul Gauthier and Cardinal Lercaro strongly stressed Jesus' sacramental unity with the poor, a theme with profound ecclesiological implications, the Council carefully avoided this emphasis. Even Vatican II's notion of the "Poor Church" is taken by European theologians such as Congar, Rahner, and others, as meaning the Church abandoning "pomp," "ostentation," and "triumphalism," and renouncing being domina to be ancilla (Bonino, ibid., p. 139).
working to abolish poverty from within a commitment with the poor expressed in political terms. The sharp dichotomy between theology and social teachings remained, and for this reason the poor "knocked on the Council's door, but only got a glimpse inside."¹

Medellin Conference: The Discovery of the Poor

The Second Vatican Council, which ushered in a new stage in the life of the universal Roman Catholic Church, had in Latin America the effect of a violent earthquake.² The Council legitimized certain tendencies which were alien to the Church in Latin America and led it to reject their opposites, which until then had represented orthodoxy. As Conway points out, "the Second Vatican Council enabled the Latin American Church to forge, for the first time, its own future."³

²José Comblin, "The Church in Latin America," p. 1. Without doubt Vatican II was a determining fact in the history of Latin American Catholicism. Dussel points out that 1962, the inaugural year of the Council, marked the beginning of a new era, a historical upturn for the Latin American Catholic Church. He states, "Up to 1962 ... the Church tended to defend its own institutions vis-a-vis the State. Since then the Church has tended to defend the rights of the poor and the common people" (History and the Theology of Liberation, p. 120). C. Peter Wagner seems to be justified in his judgment that "when Western historians evaluate this period a century from now, it may well turn out that Pope John XXIII will have been judged to have had more influence on the Latin American continent than any other man in the twentieth century. Roman Catholics will never be the same, as the result of the council he called and the attitude he infused." Latin American Theology: Radical or Evangelical (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970), p. 17.
³Conway, "Latin America's Pattern," p. 20. For a discussion of the impact of Vatican II on Latin American theological thought,
The Council Fathers had emphatically advocated an 'opening to the world,' and stated that the Church should be 'at the service of the world.' From the Latin American perspective, this world was perceived in a very specific way: an underdeveloped world of poverty and oppression.¹ Church leaders and committed Christians throughout the continent began to reflect seriously on the conciliar thought with its anthropocentric orientation,² horizontal ecclesiology, and

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¹In the years following the end of the Council, the political, economic and social context of Latin America changed dramatically. The first cracks on the developmentalist program began to appear and the hope for democratic development was on the wane. Many Christians, disillusioned with reformist strategies supported by the Church, were no longer seeking Christian answers to social and economic problems, but were joining forces with secular elites and Marxists to find more just solutions, a posture epitomized by the young revolutionary Colombian priest Camilio Torres, who joined the guerrillas in their fight against oppression in Colombia. Torres' writings are found in Camilo Torres: Revolutionary Writings (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969). See also Harold E. Davis. Revolutionaries, Traditionalists, and Dictators in Latin America (New York: Cooper Square, Publishers, 1973), pp. 75-79. The Catholic Church was increasingly perceived as an ideological ally of foreign and national forces that were keeping the continent in dependence and poverty. In a letter to Pope Paul, precisely before the Medellin Conference, The Bureau of CLASC (Latin American Committe of Christian Trade Unions, which has some five million Catholic members), expressed a hard judgment: "Beware, brother Paul. Religion and the Church have constantly been used in Latin America to justify and buttress injustice, oppression, exploitation, persecution, the murder of the poor." "Carta abierta de trabajadores latinoamericanos al papa Pablo VI," in Iglesia Latinoamericana, ¿protesto o profecía? ed. J. L. Segundo and R. Cetruio (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Busqueda, 1969), p. 82.

²John XXIII's spirit assumed by Paul VI and climaxing in the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* was characterized by an antropo-
strong emphasis on social justice. The insights of Vatican II, increased by Pope Paul's innovative *Populorum Progressio*, when applied to the situation of the continent spurned the dormant forces of Latin American Catholicism, creating an ethos of theological freedom and ecclesiological pluralism.

The Catholic community started to awake from its long lack of concern for social justice for the poor and oppressed. Within different sectors of the church a movement taking the side of the centric orientation: "All things on earth should be related to man as their center and crown" (*Gaudium et Spes*, art. 12). This concentration on man led to a revolution in Catholic theology, liturgy, preaching, and ministry (Gremillon, p. 123). It encouraged the Church to a "bold entry into the political and cultural arena" (A. T. Hennely, *Theologies in Conflict: The Challenge of Juan Luis Segundo*, pp. 2-3), and provided the stimulus for a new attitude toward communism and socialism (R. McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978], pp. 27-35).

1Published a little over a year after the close of the Council, the encyclical is primarily concerned with the relationship between rich and poor nations rather than rich and poor individuals or classes. It reproves the principles and ideology of liberalistic capitalism (art. 26) and defends the idea that individuals and peoples are entitled to become "the agents of their own destiny" (art. 77, cf. arts. 35, 70). In a key statement Paul VI left open a loophole for the possibility of violence as a last-resort measure. While he condemned the viability of violent revolution, he made a significant qualification: "We know, however that a revolutionary uprising--save where there is manifest, long-standing tyranny which would do great damage to fundamental personal rights and dangerous harm to the common good of the country--produces new injustices... and brings on new disasters" (art. 31). *Populorum Progressio* was so innovative and challenging to the status quo, that the *Wall Street Journal* described it as "warmed-over Marxism" (quoted by McAfee Brown, p. 32). To the Latin American Church, Lernoux affirms, the encyclical "had the effect of spring cleansing.... the first such cleansing in history" (p. 9). Still, though *Populorum Progressio* meant a significant step towards a realistic "option for the poor," following the traditional approach, social changes continue to be envisaged as something to be brought about "from the top down," mainly by those 'at the top' (Dorr, pp.152-156).
poor was gaining momentum, and three years after the close of Vatican II, the conference of the Latin American Bishops which met in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968, provided the Magna Charta for the new trends within the Latin American Church. The conference focused on the theme "The Church in the Present-day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council." What seems to have emerged from Medellin, however, as Gutiérrez notes, indicates a reversal of the title to a rather different reading: "The Present-day Transformation of the Council in the Light of Latin America." In an attempt to 'translate' the conciliar and papal thought for the 

1As the 1960s progressed, religious leaders, sensitive to the plight of the masses, began to raise questions regarding the role of the Church in the seemingly hopeless condition of the continent. Comblin refers to bishops, priests, and nuns who, severing the ties with traditional postures, assumed an open commitment to the poor in an "evangelical renewal which seems to be sweeping the continent" ("The Church in Latin America" pp. 7-8).

2The Latin American bishops held their Second General Conference from August 24 through September 6, 1968. The significance of the historical meeting—which gathered 150 Latin American bishops and 100 periti—for the history of Latin American Catholicism can hardly be overestimated. Orlando E. Costas, Protestant missiologist, regards it as "one of the most important events, if not the most important, in the history of Latin American Christianity." Theology of the Crossroads in Contemporary Latin America (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1976), p. 69. Comblin hardly exaggerates when he affirms that within recent developments in the Latin American Catholic Church, "nothing can be understood without Medellin" ("The Church in Latin America," p. 8). Dussel refers to it "as the Vatican II of Latin America" (History and the Theology of Liberation, p. 113).

3Gutiérrez, "South American Theology," p. 115; cf. McAfee Brown, Theology in a New Key, p. 52-54; Esther and Mortimer Arias, The Cry of My People (New York: Friendship Press, 1980), p. 108. The horizon of Medellin, contrary to Vatican II, was not the church, but the Latin American world, thus, dogmatic definitions took a subsidiary place and were basically concerned in providing support to pastoral practice.
continent, the Medellín documents went beyond what Vatican II and Paul VI had declared.

The epochal gathering proved to be a decisive historical turning point, dividing Latin American Church history into a "before" and "after" period. At Medellín, states Gutiérrez, the church


2Although the Medellín texts are copiously footnoted with conciliar texts and papal encyclicals in an attempt to apply their implications to the Latin American scene, the bishops went significantly beyond the previous papal encyclicals and the documents of Vatican II in their understanding of the function and mission of the church in the World (see "The Working Draft of the Medellín Conference," issued by the Peruvian Bishop's Commission for Social Action, in Between Honesty and Hope, trans. by John Drury [Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1970], pp. 171-192). Though the documents produced by Medellín represented a dramatic success of the progressive Catholics, they unavoidably captured the tensions between opposite forces at work in the Conference (see Gary MacEoin, Revolution Next Door [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971], pp. 111-116). Consequently they are not consistently radical (see Philip E. Berryman, "Latin American Liberation Theology," in Theology in the Americas, Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, eds. [Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1976], p. 23) and in some instances are neither thorough nor specific (see McCann, Christian Realism, pp. 137-140). The Medellín documents have been subjected to considerable criticism with regard to their methodology, language, and theology. J. B. Libanio, "CELAM III: Fears and Hopes," CrossCur 26 (1978): 20-24. The most important thing about these documents, however, is their overall statement. They endorsed a perspective from which more rigorous positions could be assumed, thus becoming "the charter for those who were working for a radical renewal of the Church in Latin America" (Dorr p. 158).

realistically perceived the world in which it was and clearly saw its place in that world. "It began to be aware of its own coming of age and to take the reins of its own destiny."¹ Throughout the sixteen documents, in which the Latin American bishops expressed their concern for the plights of the poor, a new ecclesial awareness is evident, not only in a new understanding of the fundamental problems facing Latin America² but also in a quest for new ways in which the

¹Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 134. The Medellín Conference was symbolically opened by Paul VI, the first Pope in history to come to Latin America. Paul VI's addresses at Medellín and shortly before at Bogotá during the International Eucharistic Congress, "seemed to betray a certain ambivalence, with emphasis falling on moderation and gradualism" (Abalos, p. 113). The door he had left open to revolutionary confrontation in Populorum Progressio (see above, p. 92, note 1) was quickly closed and the Pope reverted to the stifling formulas of pre-Vatican II, denouncing the "destructive currents of modern thought" and deploiring the "vacuum in our own schools of philosophy" ("Address to Workers and Youth," TPS 13 [1968]: 249-250). Changes were to be brought about "from within," as in the traditional formulations "from top down" (ibid., 237-243). Speaking directly to the new theological winds blowing over the continent, in his address to the Latin American bishops at the opening of the Medellín Conference, he called their attention to the theologians and Christian thinkers who in abandoning the philosophia perennis had "introduced into the field of faith a spirit of subversive criticism" ("Opening Address to Latin American Bishops Conference," Colonnese, p. 23). Dussel remarks that in general the discourses of the Pope "sounded in the ears of the Latin America people . . . as a call to patience on the part of the poor, which doubtless produced an immediate sigh of relief for the rich and the oppressors" (A History of the Church in Latin America, p. 145; Abalos, 114). After the conservative intervention of Paul VI, it appeared to some that the Conference would turn to the right, and be "merely another meeting" (Dussel, A History, 144). However, as the documents of the Conference reveal, at Medellín the Latin American Catholic Church reached a consciousness of its own identity, not merely as an outlet of the Roman curia. It started then a quest for its own autochthonous pastoral orientation (E. and M. Arias, p. 109).

²This new perception of the Latin American situation finds authoritative and clearcut expression in the Medellín documents. The underdevelopment of the continent is described by the bishops as
church might exert its presence in this part of the world.  

marked by "structural injustice" (Colonnese, pp. 33, 126, 182), which upholds and protects an economic system that fosters dependency and poverty, creating a situation of "institutional violence" (p. 53). The document on peace denounces the gross inequality among social classes, generated by the economic and political practices of local elites insensitive to the misery of oppressed sectors (p. 72), and the international system of dependency created by the impact of foreign economic domination and its exploitative distortion of trade (pp. 73-74). The necessity of liberation in contrast to development emerges as "one of the significant contributions of the Medellín Conference . . . Where the papal social encyclicals and Vatican II have spoken of development, the Latin American bishops have underlined the need for liberation." E. P. Fiorenza, "Latin American Liberation Theology," Interp 28 (1974):444; Libanio, p. 21.

Medellín has been variously understood. Not all interpreters agree that it marked "a turn to the left" (Núñez, "Theology of Liberation in Latin America," p. 115), or that it "made an unambiguously clear choice for radical transformation" (Abalos, "The Medellín Conference," p. 116). In his apologetic book The People's Church, A Defense of My Church, Bonaventure Kloppenburg, for example, contends that "not a single text" of the Medellín documents provides support for radical positions (pp. 90-92). The Bishop (now Cardinal) Alfonso Lopes Trujillo, the leading spokesman for the church's conservative wing in Latin America, refers to "manipulations of the Medellín documents" (Liberation or Revolution? pp. 47, 48). The Medellín Statement, however, clearly situates the Church and theology in human reality, specifically the reality of the oppressed. Through the very methodology of the documents of the Conference, which evolves from the (1) analysis of the situation to (2) theological foundation, and finally to (3) pastoral implications, the bishops "leave one in no doubt that they want to help the poor and oppressed to attain liberation" (Dorr, p. 161). In this process, the role of the Church—which above all must be a poor church—implies two main functions: Negatively, as is evident in the document on peace, the Church assumes a 'prophetic' or critical mission within the Latin American social reality. Positively, as is clear in the document on education, the Church is committed to stimulate action for justice from the grassroots through a strategy involving a dynamic process of conscientization (consciousness-raising). Here Mendellín departs radically from the traditional approach "from the top down." Rejecting paternalism—an approach that traditionally had served to alleviate the consciences of the rich far more than the misery of the poor—the Church sees as part of its mission the enabling of the poor to "become the conscious agents of their own integral development" (p. 76).
As indicated by some interpreters, "probably, the essential and revolutionary meaning of Medellín was the church's discovery of the poor," a discovery which implied an "option for the poor." Such an option, however, is not confined to intra-ecclesial decisions. It finds expression in reality, beyond the Church's walls, vis-à-vis society. "In the Medellín document the bishops accept that they have a duty of being in solidarity with those who are poor. This solidarity is made concrete through criticism of injustice and oppression." It is not enough to stand for the poor, it is necessary to be with them. Here is precisely where we find the beginnings of the innovative and revolutionary meaning of the concept "option for the poor." For the Latin American bishops it meant taking as "ours the problems and the struggles of the poor."^3

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^1Esther and Mortimer Arias, p. 109. The Medellín documents refer, expressis verbis, eleven times to "poor" and "poverty," besides an entire document dedicated to the "Poverty of the Church." The fundamental difference here in relation to Vatican II, is that while the Council was diffuse in its references to the theme, Medellín's concept of poor and poverty is marked by a more precise terminology. Informed by the conclusions of social analysis, the underlying emphasis is on the socio-economic (misery, underdevelopment), as well as on the political (dependence) dimensions. Thus the poor are not so much the "weak," the "suffering," the "sick" as Vatican II described them (above, p. 89, n. 1), but primarily those who are marginalized, alienated from the fruits of their work, and exploited (Miguéz Bonino, "Ecclesia Pauper, pp. 142-144).

^2Dorr, p. 159. For Medellín, contrary to the Council, the "poverty of the church" does not refer to the church abandoning "triumphalism" and "pomp." This poverty takes expression in concrete solidarity with the oppressed (see The Church in the Present-day, pp. 174-175).

^3Ibid., 176. In summoning the church to heed the cry of the poor, the bishops identify liberation with the mission of Christ: "Christ, our Saviour, not only loved the poor, but rather 'being rich
In espousing the cause of the poor, Medellín made three major breakthroughs. First, the conclusions of the Conference meant a decisive ecclesiological turn in the course of the Latin American Catholic Church. Breaking with the traditional ecclesiological approach expressed in its rigid institutionalism, the bishops decided to transform the Church into a servant of the poor. Second, in order to promote a transfer of power to the impoverished masses, the Church started a process of rupture with the existing social and

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He became poor, He lived in poverty. His mission centered on advising the poor of their liberation and He founded His Church as the sign of that poverty among men" (The Church in the Present-day, p. 174).

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At Medellín, the Bishops took an initial step to free the Catholic community from its old ecclesiocentrism. As Bishop Leonidas Proano observes, "Medellín was a fundamental commitment to work for the construction of a community church instead of the vertical church we inherited with its pyramid of power" (quoted by Lernoux, p. 11). Committed to work for the liberation of the poor, the Latin American Bishops gave their seal of approval to the concept of basic communities, which are the way in which the poor become actively present in the life of the Latin American Catholic Church (see McCann, pp. 141-145). Basic Christian Communities, as described by Comblin, "are the people of the poor transformed into the people of God" ("The Church in Latin America," p. 8). For a study on the ecclesiological implications of the Church linked to the poor, see Leonard Boff, "Theological Characteristics of a Grassroots Church," in The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities, pp. 124-144. Basic Christian Communities are discussed in a greater detail in chap. 2 of this study.

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It should be noted that the "servant ecclesiology" assumed by Medellín (Dulles, Models, p. 99) was not new as such. This conception appears in the thought of a number of twentieth-century theologians such as Teilhard de Chardin, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and more recently, Gibson Winter, Harvey Cox, and others (ibid., pp. 99-103). It emerged also in the formulations of Vatican II (ibid., p. 98); at Medellín, however, there was an increased determination to express this understanding within a particular social context.
political structures. Finally, this rupture in turn meant the renunciation of centuries of state patronage.

The Emergence of Liberation Theology

In A. T. Hennelly's words, "Medellín marked the beginning of a process, but not by any means a conclusion." Although the documents of the Conference speak in the idiom of liberation, due to the fact that their intention was pastoral, the texts produced by Medellín do not present theological arguments in support of the use of the understanding of liberation. Nor is there any attempt to

1The Medellín documents reflect the realization that the old relations between the Church and the ruling powers are in a state of collapse. The Church is no longer siding with the existing governments and the ruling classes. As Libanio says, in these texts we "find the Church for the first time, taking note of the common people of the popular classes" (p. 22).

2At Medellín the Church was called to separate itself from the establishment so that it might be free to criticize social and political structures and champion the cause of the poor. Abalos remarks that at Medellín the bishops made clear to the ruling elites of Latin America that "governments can no longer expect the Church to keep silent in the face of terrible injustice" (p. 115). At this point, the Catholic Church abandoned the illusion of trying to carry out its program through the established order, and by the same token it was freed from its traditional legitimizing role. This break opened up new room for winning credibility among the poor (Dussel, "Current Events in Latin America," p. 79).


4Although usually regarded as the starting point of Latin American liberation theology (Segundo Galileia, "Liberation Theology Began with Medellín," LADOC 5 [May, 1975]:1-6). Medellín is more a symbolic mark than a chronological one, since liberation theology is deeply rooted in a variety of names, contextual events, and movements that preceded the Conference. McCann seems to be correct in observing that "it would be a gross mistake . . . to see liberation theology only in the context of the bishops' conference at Medellín" (Christian Realism and Liberation Theology, p. 132).
elaborate a systematic theology from the perspective of the poor.\footnote{Even the document on the "Poverty of the Church" (The Church in the Present-day, pp. 173-174), poverty is not discussed from a theological perspective. There is no indication that the poor were considered methodologically or hermeneutically relevant.}

Medellín, however, stood at the beginning of systematic writing on the theme of liberation. After the Conference a broad stream of writings appeared\footnote{An increasing number of Latin American theologians came to hold that if they ever were going to fulfill the Gospel mandate for Latin America--good news to the poor, theology itself had to be liberated from external dominance of a "foreign" theology, which, though unintentionally, had effectively been used to support the status quo, rather than being a means of bringing the good news of liberation to the oppressed. This is precisely one of the main thrusts of Segundo's The Liberation of Theology. For bibliographical information on liberation theology, see above, p. 6, n. 2.} which brought forth a new and original type of theological reflection. Theologically dependent for centuries, the Latin American Catholic Church began to witness the emergence of a theology wrapped up in a radically revolutionary style, reflecting on the continent's struggle for liberation.

The theoretical sources

The origins and development of Latin American liberation theology have been so frequently narrated\footnote{For a pertinent summary of the development of liberation theology, see Hugo Assmann, Oprección-liberación: desafio a los Christianos (Montevideo: Tierra Nueva, 1971), pp. 45-50; Manzanera, Teología y Salvación-Liberación, pp. 15-88; For a more extended discussion, see Maqueo, Liberación y teología; Dussel, History and the Theology of Liberation; Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology; Kirk, Liberation Theology.} that only a few major strokes are necessary to provide perspective. Miguez Bonino correctly points out that the theology of liberation did not "develop in
Although it presents concepts that are unique to the Latin American theological thought, it has also drawn from different sources outside of the continent, and, therefore, must be seen in terms of a broader historical and theological perspective.

1 Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 60. Assmann overstates his case when he refers to Liberation theology as an "indigenous" or "autochthonous" theology (Opresión-liberación, p. 106), since such a language seems to imply that it developed exclusively within the limits of Latin America.

2 Liberation theologians generally see various factors contributing to the rise of the movement (see Comblin, "Criticá de la teología de la secularización," in Fe y secularización, pp. 35-37; Gutiérrez A Theology of Liberation, chap. 11). These antecedents include the influence of contemporary religious and theological developments, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, and significant secular influences at work in modern times. For a helpful summary, see Alan Neely, "Liberation Theology in Latin America: Antecedents and Autochthony," Missio 7 (1978): 345-370. The impact of the Catholic aggiornamento on Latin American theological developments can hardly be overestimated. We noticed earlier the immense influence of Mater et Magistra, Pacem in Terris, Populorum Progressio, as well as Vatican II’s Gaudium et Spes. Vatican II, as Fierro observes, made possible the development of "a theology that gleaned from the council not so much its claims to legitimacy, but rather its right to divest itself of the dead weight of the whole prior dogmatics" (The Militant Gospel, p. 12). Gutiérrez sees the text and the spirit of Vatican II as "undoubtedly necessary as point of reference" (A Theology, p. 46). Furthermore, although the overall influence of European theologians, such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, Yves Congar on liberation theologians might be regarded as "very uneven" (Neely p. 354), Gutiérrez especially reflects a depth of involvement with the Roman Catholic progressive theology represented by these names (see A Theology, chaps. 2-7). Aware of the profound impact of Europe on Latin American theology, Dussel sees liberation theology as "the child of European theology," even though it is "another avenue of the same tradition" ("The Political and Ecclesial Context," p. 175).

Moreover, even when Dussel manages to write his History and the Theology of Liberation, without mentioning a single Protestant antecedent or contribution to the movement, and liberation theologians tend to use the term "church" in their writings, almost always referring to the Roman Catholic community (Phillip E. Berryman, "Latin American Liberation Theology," ThSt 34 [1973]:358), Protestant contributions to the movement have been considerably
Although the complexity of the remote and immediate


Finally, to the thought of Catholic and Protestant theologians, liberation theology mixes the philosophical thought of Georg W. F. Hegel, F. Engels, Karl Marx, Karl Mannheim, Thomas Kuhn, John Dewey, Herbert Marcuse, and Ernest Bloch ("Liberation Theology: an Overview," in Evangelicals & Liberation, ed. Carl E. Armerding [Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1977], pp. 1-9). As a result of the impact of the Christian-Marxist dialogue that has taken place in recent times (see Roger Garaudy, From Anathema to Dialogue [New York: Herder and Herder, 1966]), liberation theology bears particularly the influence of Marx. This influence is not only in its epistemological affirmation that there is no truth outside or beyond the concrete and historical events but also in its anthropocentric vision. Liberation theology's emphasis on the revolutionary action of the oppressed, its critique of capitalism as well as its view of social reality, to a great extent seem to arise out of the Marxist notion of the oppressor-oppressed contradiction (see Neely, "Liberation Theology in Latin America" pp. 345-347). Likewise its methodology, which reverses the traditional approach, making praxis the center of gravity around which theological work rotates, bears the distinctive influence of Marx (see Miroslav Volf, "Doing and Interpreting: An Examination of the Relationship between Theory and Practice in Latin American
antecedents of liberation theology defies summation, fundamentally its theoretical sources outside of Latin America may be reduced to the influence of Johannes Metz's "political theology," considered the most significant example of contemporary European Roman Catholic influence on liberation theology, and Jürgen Moltmann's "theology of hope," whose theological position is regarded as the "closest to the

Liberation Theology," Themelios 8 [1983]:11-19; Kirk, Liberation Theology, pp. 35-54). Although the role of Marxism in Liberation Theology is subject to debate (Neely, p. 347), Jürgen Moltmann chides Latin Americans for talking about Marx and Engels "as if they were Latin American discoveries" ("An Open Letter to José Miguez Bonino," ChrCris 36 [1976]:58). Liberation theologians, to be sure, do not claim to have discovered Marx; however, they do openly acknowledge their debt to him. It seems that Jose P. Miranda speaks for all when he affirms that "we are all riding on Marx's shoulders" (Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression [Maryknoll: N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1974], p. xiii).


perspective and interests of the Latin American liberation school.\(^1\)

Arising mainly as a critical corrective to the privatization of the Christian faith which had taken place in existentially oriented contemporary theology,\(^2\) political theology as well as the theology of hope,\(^3\) each in its own manner, insists on the social and

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\(^3\) In his attempt to get away from Barth's theology of the word and Bultmann's theology of existence, both criticized for turning the eschatological reality into an already here, and for not taking seriously the eschatological dimension of Christianity, Moltmann in his *Theology of Hope*, under the influence of the Marxist philosopher...
political dimensions of the Christian faith. According to Metz' "the deprivatizing of theology is the primary critical task of theology."\(^1\) To be relevant in modern society, which is seen as radically hominized and secularized, theology, Metz insists, must serve as a critic of the socio-political structures.\(^2\) Within this theological obligation the church itself must become an "institution of social criticism."\(^3\) Positively the Church must be the "memoria passionis

Ernst Block, concentrated on themes of future and hope. In later times, however, he concluded that his approach was still too abstract, bearing little relationship to praxis. Thus his theological emphasis, influenced by Metz and by the Frankfurt School of social critical theology, shifted from the future to the present ("Politics and the Development of a Political Theology," ChrCent 87 [1970]:291). As McBrien remarks, Moltmann's "thinking came to center on the cross of Jesus, shifting from hope in Christ's future to the following of the historical Jesus" (Catholicism, p. 500).

\(^1\)Metz, A Theology of the World, p. 110. This conception implies a decisive move from a theology whose key words are "faith and understanding," to one which focuses on "faith and action" (Sülle, Political Theology, p. 3). For a comprehensive discussion of the shift in theological thinking from the "vertical" to the "horizontal" dimensions of the Christian faith, see Langdon Gilkey, Reaping the Whirlwind. A Christian Interpretation of History (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), pp. 226-238; A. Perez Esclarín, Atheism and Liberation, pp. 96-106.


\(^3\)Metz, A Theology of the World, p. 134. This function is mainly possible because, according to Metz, the church is part of the world (pp. 13-50). The role of the church in a political theology, however, is not to advance any political ideology of its own or to ally itself with any political party; rather its task is to be critical of society and denounce any status quo which would claim to be absolute. For this reason Metz emphasizes the need to formulate the eschatological message of the New Testament in the conditions of contemporary society stressing the political significance of the Bible's eschatological symbols (p. 90). This emphasis, in turn, calls for an indirect or "critical" relationship to politics, based on Christianity's "eschatological proviso," which represents a religious repudiation of any form of political absolutism. All
Jesu Christi in the midst of our society... the bearer of a dangerous and subversive memory on which... depends... the future of our humanity." On the same side of the theological spectrum, Moltmann's emphasis on the political transcription of eschatology opened a new avenue for liberation theologians. For Moltmann the true category of history is the future. The perception and interpretation of history is then eschatological and future-oriented. Thus, because Christian theology is entirely centered on the future, it is essentially a theology of hope. Hope, however, according to Moltmann, is not only expectation; it is the demand for an "historic transformation of life." It therefore has political dimensions and attempts to bridge theory and practice. Hope in Moltmann's thought "is like a 'spear-point' of history, which questions the present to make the future present here now." In reality, Metz observes, must be measured in the light of the promised kingdom of God. Because the kingdom has not yet come in all its perfection, there is nothing, including the Church, which escapes the critical gaze (see pp. 107-140).


2Moltmann, A Theology of Hope, p. 260.

3Ibid., p. 330. Following an approach very close to that of Metz, and having also in mind the classic Marxist critique of the Church, Moltmann emphasizes that "mission means not merely propagation of faith" (ibid.). From this perspective Moltmann re-applies to theology the famous eleventh thesis of Marx on Feuerbach: "The theologian therefore is not satisfied with providing a different interpretation of the world, history and the human condition; for him it is a matter of transforming them in the expectation of a divine transformation" (p. 84).

4Geffré, p. 84.
this conception, the mission of the church is to be at the service of
the world anticipating in history the possibilities for the future.  

Although the extent to which Metz and Moltmann have
influenced the theologians of liberation remains a matter of debate,
a careful reading of Gutiérrez's discussion of the "political
dimensions of the Gospel," Assmann's comments on the "political
dimension of faith," or Rubem Alves' book fittingly entitled A
Theology of Human Hope, suggests that it has been substantial.  

The church is the church of God, Moltmann argues, "only
where in specific acts of service it is obedient to its mission to
the world. . . . A Church for the world." (Theology of Hope, p. 327.)
The church's service of the world and humanity is not such that it
strives to keep everything as it is. Its service is rather for the
sake of helping the world and humankind transform themselves and
become what they are promised to be. "For this reason 'Church for the
world' can mean nothing else but 'Church for the kingdom of God' and
the renewing of the world" (p. 328). Salvation as proclaimed by the
Church is not merely salvation of the soul but also "the realization
of the eschatological hope of justice, the humanizing of man, the
socializing of humanity, peace for all creation" (p. 329). Thus the
mission of the church, Moltmann holds in a later work, "embraces all
activities that serve to liberate man from his slavery in the
presence of the coming God, slavery which extends from economic
necessity to Godforsakenness" (The Church in the Power of the Spirit

Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 220-223.

Assmann, Theology for a Nomad Church, pp. 29-40.

Rubem Alves, A Theology of Human Hope (Washington, D.C.: Corpus,
1969). Alves, a leading Brazilian Protestant liberation theologian,
in the very title of his work, which evolved from his doctoral
Assmann also regards Moltmann's theological formulation "una de las
mejores cosas de la teología actual" (Opresión-Liberación, p. 119),
and Gutiérrez, in spite of his criticism of Moltmann's work, admits
that it is undoubtedly one of the most important in contemporary
teology (A Theology, p. 218).

For a brief summary of the influence exercised by Metz and
Theology in context

It should be kept in mind, however, that while the roots of Latin American theological reflection today are marked by the multiplied influences of outside sources, the fact still remains that liberation theology is above all a contextual theology.\(^1\) Its starting point is not a hypothetical case, but the actual poor and exploited members of the Latin American society. Therefore, if to some extent liberation theology represents a continuation of contemporary theological movements such as the "political theology" and the "theology of hope," it represents also a decisive rupture from their content, methodology, and conclusions.\(^2\)

\(^1\)At the core of liberation theology is the understanding of the "contextual nature of theology" (Aharon Sapiezian, "Theology of Liberation—Liberation of Theology Educational Perspectives," ThEd 9 [1973]: 254). Theologians of liberation are acutely aware of the fact that theology is necessarily conditioned by its social situation and that in some sense this context provides a unique perspective from which to view and interpret the Gospel. Thus the fundamental difference in the situation of Latin America, they point out, called for a drastic and deliberate rejection of imported theological formulations. For a brief analysis of the reasons for this protest, see J. Andrew Kirk, Theology Encounters Revolution (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), pp. 116-117; also Kirk's article "A New Theology from Latin America," Chmn 88 (1978):108-109.

\(^2\)Although liberation theologians join Metz and Moltmann in the shift from the private to the public realm and dedicate themselves to a political interpretation of the Gospel message, they move beyond the Europeans and pose to their theological formulations severe praxis-oriented criticism. Gutiérrez, for example, objects to Metz's political theology as ultimately academic, mainly because Metz is not a victim of the kind of "dependency, injustice and exploitation in which most of mankind finds itself" (A Theology of Liberation, p. 224). Therefore it is too utopian, too abstract, and
By the late 1960s, and with astonishing clarity, the true face of Latin America emerged "in all its naked roughness."¹ Unemployment, malnutrition, infant mortality, illiteracy, and ever increasing inequality between the rich and the poor² formed the shocking reality described by Gutiérrez in forceful language:


²For an analysis of the Latin American situation in this period, see Marcos Kaplan, "Economic Aspects of the Latin American Crisis," pp. 242-266; also Sven Lindqvist, The Shadow: Latin America Faces the Seventies (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969); Gunnar Myrdal, The Challenge of World Poverty (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970); see also Socio-Economic Progress in Latin America (Washington, D.C.: Inter-American Development Bank, 1970). By the mid 1970s, according to the figures of the military government, one quarter of Brazil's population of over 100 million was regarded as "indigent and destitute," no less than 70 percent of the national income flowing to the highly privileged 20 percent of the upper echelons of society; whereas 40 percent of the population survived on a family income of less than $840 a year in a market of internationalized prices. "One can extrapolate this appalling imbalance with relative safety to most other Latin American Countries. Aharon Sapsezian, "Ministry with the Poor," IntRMiss 66 (1977):4.
What we are faced with is a situation that takes no account of man's dignity or his most elemental needs, that does not provide his biological survival or his basic right to be free and autonomous. Poverty, injustice, alienation, and man's exploitation of his fellow men combine to form a situation which the Medellin Conference did no hesitate to condemn as institutionalized violence.

Within this context, the change in attitudes toward the real causes of Latin America's unjust social structure, which had been in process, became radicalized. Underdevelopment and poverty could no


2The hopes of the fifties gave way to the disillusiones of the sixties as the gap between developed and underdeveloped countries widened. Actually disillusionment with development strategies did not wait long after the launching of the "decade of development." Anibal Pinto, Chile: Un caso de desarrollo frustrado (Santiago: Editorial Universitaria, 1957); Celso Furtado, A Formação Econômica do Brasil (Rio de Janeiro: Fundo de Cultura, 1962). From 1963 on the failure of the "development myth," as it came to be called (Michael Bermann, "Impact of the Development Myth," EcR 19 [1967]:367); became increasingly evident and with disturbing insistence economists started raising questions regarding the supposed benefits of the development model which promised so much but delivered so little (see MacEoin, Revolution Next Door, pp. 1-22) Contrary to what had been expected, dependence of the Latin American nations on the developed world, especially on the United States, was increasing rather than decreasing. Andre Gunder Frank described the results of the developmentalist model as "the development of underdevelopment." Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America (New York: Monthly Press Review, 1967); see Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966); also Andre G. Frank, Latin American: Underdevelopment or Revolution (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968); Hello Jaguaribe, La dependencia político-económica de América Latina (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1969). Finally, even the economic growth experienced in some geographic areas, such as Brazil, for example, benefited the wealthier economic strata exclusively, while two-thirds of the population found themselves further from their goals than before. John T. Carmody and Denise L. Carmody observe that between 1960 and 1970, the top 5 percent of Brazilian income earners increased their share of the national wealth from 27.4 to 36.3 percent. During the same period the share of the bottom 80 percent decreased from 45.5 to 36.8 percent. Contemporary Catholic Theology (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 184.
longer be seen as the result of economic, cultural, and social backwardness. The traditional notion expressed by the development/underdevelopment analysis was replaced by the revolutionary understanding translated in the formula dependence/underdevelopment. Dependence thus surfaced as the key element in the interpretation of the appalling reality. It is precisely the Latin American theory of

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1It should be noted that although Medellín was already framed within the critique of the developmentalist economic model (Libanio, "CELAM III: Fears and Hopes," p. 21), it was rather more descriptive than analytical and did not "arrive at the mechanisms of oppression, for which it lacked adequate instruments of analysis" (Phillip E. Berryman, "Latin American Liberation Theology," in Theology in the Americas, p. 26). Awareness of the historical situation of dependence came as Latin American thinkers turned to Marxism as an instrumental tool (Migüez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 71; McAfee Brown, Theology in a New Key, pp. 64-70). Then it became increasingly evident that the structural character of the problem demanded structural answers. The answer was no longer economic integration but liberation. For Gutiérrez, only within "the framework of world-wide class struggle" can the Latin American reality be interpreted and transformed (A Theology, p. 87).

2Relying heavily on the work of Latin American political economists Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, Gutiérrez defines the "Latin American reality" as "dependence" rather than "underdevelopment" (ibid., pp. 84-88). From this perspective, poverty came to be perceived not as something accidental which can be eliminated with more modern techniques; rather it was part and parcel of a repressive system. Thus there could be no "development" for the poor since their "underdevelopment was due to systematic despoliation of which they were victims (Dussel, "The Political and Ecclesial Context," p. 183) from without (Migüez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 17) and from within (Floreal Ureta, "Algunas reflexiones acerca de la teología," DialTeol 12 [1978]: 30; Pierro Bigo, The Church and Third World Revolution (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1974), pp. 23-39). Latin American theory of dependence, however, is challenged by the American Catholic scholar Michael Novak in his The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982). Relying on the work of another Latin American economist, Joseph Ramos, Novak cites six facts that refute the theory of dependence (for a summary see Novak "A Theology of Development for Latin America," in R. Nash, ed., Liberation Theology, pp. 21-44). These six
dependence that must be regarded as the fundamental condition in any attempt to account for the revolutionary theology that emerged in the continent.¹

Motivated by the situation of poverty and dependence of Latin America and in an attempt to be responsive to that situation, a new kind of theological reflection was fostered among Roman Catholics. Radically departing from northern theological enterprise, it focused

facts cannot be squared with any theory that purports to explain Latin American underdevelopment in terms of United States development. Latin American poverty, Ramos and Novak claim, is a long-term consequence of the "internal structures common to Latin American and Iberian countries." Long after the overseas empires of Spain and Portugal have vanished, their cultural legacies remain "fundamental obstacles" to economic development (The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism, pp. 304-305). For a synthesis, see McCann, "Liberation and the Multinationals," THI 41 (1984):51-60. The strong feeling that their continent has been victimized by the massive dominance of North American corporations is not easily dismissed. In a "Open Letter to North American Christians" thirteen Latin American Protestant leaders repeatedly charged that "the oppressive power of America is turning Central and South America into one gigantic prison, and in some regions one vast cemetery . . . Today, we Latin Americans are discovering that, apart from our own weaknesses and sins, not a few of our misfortunes, miseries and frustrations flow from and are perpetuated within a system that produces substantial benefits for your country but goes on swallowing us more and more in oppression, in impotence, in death," Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, ed- Mission Trends No 4: Liberation Theologies in North America and Europe (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 73. A recent book published in West Germany provides an analysis of North American economic policies in Latin America. Frank Niess, Der Koloss der Norden, Geschichte der Lateinamerikapolitik der USA (Koln: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1984); see also Piero Gheddo, Why Is the Third World Poor? (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1973); William Wipfler, "Latin America: U. S. Colony," ChCr 32 (April, 1972):68ff.

Presenting the case for a theology of liberation, its most renowned advocate argues that, contrary to much of contemporary theology, which takes its start from the challenge posed by the nonbeliever, in Latin America the main challenge comes from the nonhuman, i.e., the poor, the human being who is not recognized as such by the prevailing social order. Thus, "the question . . . is no longer how we are to speak about God in a world come of age; it is rather how to proclaim him Father in a world that is not human and what the implications might be telling nonhumans that they are children of God."²

Basically concerned in relating the teachings of the Christian faith to the lives and struggles of the poor and oppressed, liberation theologians came to the conviction that in Latin America, theology had to discover a new direction for its reflection. Since the central question which it must answer in this context is not

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¹By 1968 theology in Latin America adopted the experiences and aspirations of the "grassroots," and thus, remarks Dussel, "was born the theology of liberation" ("The Political and Ecclesial Context," p. 183). Assmann observes that 1970 was the first year in which conferences and symposia on the theme of "theology of liberation" became commonplace throughout Latin America (Theology for a Nomad Church, p. 52). He lists no less than six such conferences, all international gatherings (pp. 52-53). Many others were held at the national and regional levels. Dussel points to a meeting of Latin American theologians in Buenos Aires, August 3-6, 1970, as an occasion when the "theology of liberation" was discussed in detail (A History of the Church, o. 246; see Maqueo, Liberación y teología, pp. 177-205; Schillebeeckx, "Liberation Theology Between Medellín and Puebla," pp. 3-7; Renato Poblete, "From Medellín to Puebla," Worldview, October 1978: 27-30).

"What should be believed?" but "What is to be done?" theology could not be conceived simply as "wisdom" or as "rational knowledge," as it was traditionally. In Latin America, theology should now be formulated as a critical reflection on the historical praxis of faith. Gutiérrez capsulates the new way of doing theology in the neologism "orthopraxis." As orthopraxis, theology shifts the primary axis of faith from right knowledge (ortho-doxy) to right action (ortho-praxis).

Puebla Conference: a Preferential Option for the Poor

Latin American theology, as Rosemary Ruether notes, "arises


2Traditionally, Gutiérrez says, the classical tasks of theology have centered around two poles: "theology as wisdom" and "theology as rational knowledge" (A Theology, pp. 3-5). Theology as wisdom, predominant during the first centuries of Church history, was linked to spiritual life. Theology as rational knowledge emerged in the twelfth century, emphasizing the intellectual discipline of dealing with the relationship of faith and reason mainly done in Aristotelian categories. In consequence of this development, during the scholastic period, and especially after Trent, theology became an ancillary discipline of the magisterium of the Church, whose main function was reduced to the passive exposition of the "revealed truths," defense of "true doctrines," and the teaching of "revealed truth authoritatively" (ibid., p. 6).

3Theology as wisdom and rational knowledge, Gutiérrez agrees, remain valid dimensions of theology, but he requires that it be one thing more: a critical reflection on the Church's presence and activity in the world in the light of revelation (A Theology, p. 13). "Theology as critical reflection on historical praxis is thus ... a theology of liberating transformation of the history of humanity. A theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed" (p. 15).

4Gutiérrez, p. 10.
from a Church that is, first of all, a repentant Church. A Church that knows it came as part of a system of exploitation and acted for much of its history as a tool of domination.¹ With the emergence of liberation theology, the Church began to enter an entirely new world, "the world of the other, of the poor and exploited and oppressed classes."² From this perspective, not only society with its dominant and unjust politico-economic structures is strongly denounced, but the traditional Church, "burdened with wealth, an accomplice of oppressive government, guilty of preaching an alienating formulation of the gospel,"³ is seen as living "in a state of mortal sin."⁴ The Latin American Church was then "living through a time of crisis and a moment of judgment,"⁵ precisely what the word crisis in theological language means.


³Gary MacEoin, Revolution Next Door, p. 113.

⁴Henri Fesquet, a French observer who covered Pope Paul's visit to Latin America at the time of the Medellín conference, entitled the book he wrote on his return A Church in the State of Mortal Sin, Une Eglise en état de pêché mortel (Paris: Grasset, 1969).

⁵Gutiérrez, "Introduction," p. xiii. From within and from without the Catholic community was being called into question by those "who experience in their daily lives the terrible distance that separates the Church from her roots in the gospel and her lack of harmony with the real world of Latin America" (ibid.). It came
While the popularity of liberation theology was gaining world-wide attention, due to international meetings and publications dealing with this particular theme, in the Latin American Catholic Church a chasm between "conservatives" and "progressives" was growing increasingly to be felt that what was at stake was the very meaning of the Church, if not the Christian faith in Latin America. McGrath had already observed that "were it not for Latin America, we could say that the developed nations of the world are of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the underdeveloped are of the non Judeo-Christian tradition." This situation, McGrath remarks, gives to Latin America a particularly urgent character within the Church. It is here that Christians must apply their sense of justice, international aid, and national obligation to development. If Christians fail here, he concludes, what can they hope to tell the rest of the world about justice, faith and love? ("Church Doctrine in Latin America after the Council," pp. 102-103).

Among others, the meeting of theologians held in Mexico City in 1975, was of particular relevance. At that time, preparation was being made for the forthcoming hemispheric gathering of CELAM (the proceedings of this gathering were published in book form by Enrique Ruiz Maldonado, Liberacion y cautiverio. Debates en torno al método de la teologia de America Latina (Mexico City: Comité organizador, 1975). At that time an "ideological hardening" was perceived in the majority of Latin American countries, mainly under the influence of military regimes. Two other significant meetings were held. One was in Detroit (1975), with worldwide representation and special participation of some prominent North American theologians, such as Gregory Baum, James Cone, Robert McAfee Brown, Rosemary Ruether and Frederick Herzog (see Sergio Torres, ed., Theology in the Americas [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976; Alfred T. Hennelly, "Who Does Theology in the Americas?" America 33 [1975]:137-139). Another meeting was held in Tanzania, in August of 1976, with representatives from Africa, Asia and Latin America, aiming "to scrutinize the signs of the times," to listen to "the Spirit amid the divisions between the rich and the poor, and to examine the two distinct perspectives operative in theology today" (Sergio Torres, ed., The Emergent Gospel, pp. vii, viii). Furthermore a significant step for the popularization of Latin American theology was taken with the publication of an entire issue of the influential Concilium (Vol. 6 No. 10, 1974) dealing with the theme of liberation and made available in many languages (see Dupertuis, pp. 89-94).
widener. Liberation criticism of the older theology and the relation of Church and State had not convinced many bishops, especially those who defended pre-Vatican II theology and who, according to Segundo Galilea, had "not yet committed themselves to history," and who, in turn, accused liberation theology as being too "horizontalist" and lacking a "solid epistemology."

The tensions and expectations in the conservative and progressive camps began to center around the Third General Conference of the Latin American bishops to take place in Puebla, Mexico, in January of 1979. Both sides felt that Puebla would carry decisive

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1 Already at the Medellin meeting opinions were divided among the participating bishops (see Philip E. Berryman, "Latin American Liberation Theology," pp. 22-23; MacEoin, Revolution Next-Door, pp. 111-131). Later, with evidences suggesting Vatican involvement, there surfaced organized resistance to the liberation movement. Redmond, "Recent Themes in Catholic Social Thought in Latin America," pp. 38-39). With the election of the conservative bishop Alfonso López Trujillo for the direction of the Latin American Bishops Council (CELAM), liberation theology soon became the target of conservative forces (See Gary MacEoin and Nivita Riley, Puebla: A Church Being Born [New York: Paulist Press, 1980], pp. 22-26). Resistance to liberation theology has increased in recent years.


3 Segundo Galilea, cited by Redmond, p. 38.


5 The Conference was originally planned for 1978, a decade after Medellin, but with the death of two Popes (Paul VI, died in mid 1978, and his successor, John Paul I, a few weeks later), it found itself postponed. When finally convened, CELAM III had the participation of 21 cardinals, 66 archbishops, and 131 bishops out of 356 (see Pablo Ramos, "New Light on the Pope in Mexico," The Month 12 [1979]: 118-122).
The major issue facing the Puebla Conference was not whether it would say anything strikingly new and radical. It was rather whether it would allow the Medellín commitment to the poor to vanish under innumerable qualifications. There is little doubt that a determined effort was made by the conservative side to ensure that both the style and outcome of Puebla would be quite different from those of Medellín. Furthermore, as Comblin observed, "there were hopes--and fears--that Puebla would administer the coup de grâce to liberation theology," a fact exceedingly disturbing equally to both Commentators and journalists made public the tensions behind the scenes in the preparation of Puebla (see the articles by Penny Lernoux, Moisés Sandoval, and Jon Sobrino in Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary). The renowned quarterly review, Cross Currents, devoted an entire issue--vol. 28, Spring 1978--to discuss the preparations for the Conference, with contributions from Latin American, North American, Canadian, and German theologians.

The Preparatory Document (PD) which circulated among participants several months before the meeting was heavily criticized by liberation theologians as a "subtle rejection of Medellín" ("Our Martyrs Give Hope of Resurrection," by a group of Peruvian theologians, CrossCur 28 [1978]:47-54). The concept of the poor as expressed by the PD became a main issue in the discussion. "Fearful of reduction," liberation theologians objected, the PD gave to the term poor "broad meaning," thus, "in the end the poor are everyone and no one at the same time" (p. 48).

See by the Costa Rican Ecumenical Council, "The Manipulation of CELAM," CrossCur 28: (1978):60-65. For a detailed account of the meeting, see McCoin and Riley, Puebla: A Church Being Born; for a summary, see Gerald McCarthy, "The Politics of 'Puebla,'" The Month 12 (1979):39-68. In face of the militant campaign against the theology of liberation, a vigorous protest was made by several German theologians including Karl Rahner, Johannes B. Metz, Ernst Kaesemann "We Must Protest," CrossCur 28 (1978):65-70.

Church and the dominant politico-economic order. Yet, as a whole the final document that emerged from Puebla re-affirmed as well as in the other Mexican addresses (these addresses are found in Puebla and Beyond, pp. 47-83), each attempting to convince the public that the Pope was on their side—that he had condemned liberation theology, or that he had come down in favor of what the liberation theologians stood for (see "John Paul vs. Liberation Theology," Time, February 12, 1979, pp. 68-69; Dawn Gibeaw and Penny Lernoux, "U.S. Press Errs in Summarizing Pope at Puebla," NCR [Feb. 16, 1979]: 10, 39; Farn Peerman, "Did the Pope Apply the Brakes at Puebla?" ChrCent [Feb. 1979]: 203; Harvey Cox, "A Puebla Diary" Commonweal [May 16. 1979]: 145; Michael Novak, "Liberation Theology and the Pope," and James V. Schall, "The American Press Views Puebla," both in Quentin L. Quade, ed., The Pope and Revolution: John Paul II Confronts Liberation Theology, pp. 73-85 and 86-96; see also the articles on Puebla in LumVit 34 [1979]: 311-390). As expected, in the context of a highly polarized situation, the Pope's addresses, especially his speech to the Puebla Conference, would contain a good deal of, "on the one hand . . . and on the other" (see Dorr, pp. 210-213). Comblin is probably correct in his affirmation that at the Conference no clear decision was made in regard to liberation theology since opinions among the bishops were equally divided (The Bishops' Conference at Puebla," pp. 9-12). In recent times, Vatican's reserves in relation to liberation theology have been made more evident. Alfonso Lopes Trujillo, declared opponent of liberation theology, made cardinal by John Paul II, became the "the pope's man in Latin America" (Peter Hebblethwaite, "Do Curialist's 'Hints' Presage a Reprimand of Liberation Theology?" NCR, April 6, 1984, p. 24). Moreover Leonardo Boff's recent troubles with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (see Tarcisio Beal, NCR, September 28, 1984, p. 20; also Beal's "Boff's Silence Can Still Be Heard," NCR March 7, 1986; ChrT, October 19, 1984, pp. 46-47), and the publication of a 36-page paper on the movement, Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1984) are revealing indications of disapproval. Apparently, the principal objection to liberation theology is the use of Marxist analysis to explain the Latin American reality (Peter Hebblethwaite, p. 24; cf., Vatican's Instructions, pp. 17-34). Generally speaking, the Pope's dealings with the liberation theology issue are marked by extreme caution. In effect it seems that his aim has been to co-opt the acceptable themes of the movement, while trimming away objectionable elements ("Discord in the Church," Time, February 4, 1985, pp. 56-57).

the directions set by CELAM II, some ten years before. Despite political and ecclesiastical pressures, the Church leaders were not willing to compromise on the central elements of the policies adopted at Medellín. As expressed in the very title of one of the central chapters of its documents, "A Preferential Option for the Poor," Puebla reaffirmed the main stances taken at Medellín. Adopting the controversial phrase which has since become a powerful summary and symbol of the new reality in the life of the Catholic Church in the continent, the Conference gave clear indication of its endorsement of the dynamic segments of Latin American Catholicism. Thus, contrary to the expectations of many, liberation theology, the grass-roots communities and the Christian's political commitment on behalf of the poor came away from Puebla much stronger and with more legitimacy.

Since Puebla, as Dussel notes, the whole experience of a new model of the church being applied to political and civil society has continued and indeed been reenforced. Lending support to the

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1"Evangelization at Present," # 1134-1166, Puebla and Beyond, pp. 264-267. The document does not give a systematic account of what "option for the poor" does or does not mean, though it indicates in practical terms what it involved (see arts. 1134, 1154, and 1160).

2Harvey Cox and Faith Annette Sand summarized the results of Puebla, remarking: "What happened at Puebla? Not very much, really." "What Happened at Puebla," ChrCris 39 (1979):57. This conclusion, however, misses the deep meaning of the conference. Medellín had suggested an option for the poor, but it was far more difficult, and of equal relevance, to reaffirm commitments to this option more than a decade later, when the full cost had become apparent.


"Church of the poor" actualized in the Comunidades Eclesiais de Base, Puebla opened wide the gates for what Gutiérrez calls "the irruption of the poor." The epochal Conference, as the culmination of Medellin, the comunidades eclesiàs de base, or comuni­dades cristas de base (grassroot communities), had become so vital an element of church life that the final documents recognized the importance of this "new ecclesial reality" (The Church in the Present Day Transformation of Latin America, pp. 102-112). Since Medellin, the poor organized in these grassroot communities were finding voice, self-identification, leadership, and above all, gaining consciousness of the oppressive reality in which they were living. Puebla, Gutiérrez indicates, "accepted and hailed base-level ecclesial communities as an event of primary importance in the life of the Church" (The Irruption of the Poor," p. 115; also Esther and Mortimer Arias, The Cry of My People, p. 116; Jacques Van Nieuwenhove, "Puebla and the Grass-Roots Communities," LumenVitae 34 [1979]:311-330). According to Dussel, after Puebla "it is not prophetic groups but the church as a whole that is supporting the grassroots movement" ("Current Events," p. 99) however, he recognizes the confrontation between two different models of the church existing side by side, and forecasts the possibility of increased tensions. The "Basic Communities" are discussed later in greater detail.

of complex developments, made official a new place for the poor in the

theological and ecclesial chart. Increasingly the poor have been moving to center stage in Latin America, and around this happening, as Gutiérrez observes turns the sociopolitical life of the continent and also the life of the church and theological reflection itself.1

Conclusion

From the time of the discovery of the continent up until recently, the life of the Catholic Church in Latin America was expressed by means of two main ecclesiological models, through which the Church approached the fundamental question of the relation between faith and human existence, between faith and social reality: First, the "Christendom" model undergirded by Augustinian theology, imported from Europe through the Spanish-Portuguese conquest and colonization; second, the "distinction of planes" model grounded on Catholic liberalism's rediscovery of Aquinas' teaching on "grace and nature." Although these two theological formulations are marked by fundamentally distinctive visions, essentially they did not affect the practical life of the Church in Latin America.

In each case, the Church saw itself as the center of the work of salvation, whose mission was to protect faith and increase in


numbers. Within this absolutist view of its nature and mission, the relations between the Catholic community and the civil society in which it existed were fatally determined. Concerned solely with its institutional expansion and preservation, the Church directed its efforts to its own benefits. In reality this meant that in order to safeguard and promote its goals, the Catholic Church in Latin America tended to align itself with the ruling classes as the necessary channels of pastoral action. These forces, in turn, in their hegemonic strategy, enlisted the Church in the service of legitimating their rule. Therefore, while serving its own interests and the interests of the economically and politically powerful, the Church was unable to identify itself in any meaningful way with the poor.

Parallel to this alliance of the church with the elites, Christian categories and values were reinterpreted by the ideology of the existing social order, thus reinforcing the domination of one social class over another. The message of the gospel was generally transcendentalized, salvation was mainly conceived within a one-sided extra-historical and spiritualistic emphasis. The biblical notion of poor and poverty were idealized and spiritualized. Furthermore, the prevalent thinking within the Church was that poverty and oppression were ordained by nature—therefore by God—and their victims should bear them patiently and hope for a reward in heaven. Thus the Church refused to accept responsibility for social and economic realities, even though it was a solid pillar of the established order.

Vatican II opened a new way for exploration. Whereas the scholastic framework of the previous teaching had a tendency to
abstract from temporality, the Council faced the modern world squarely. With the ecclesiological shift, the Catholic Church, to a considerable extent, freed itself from ecclesiocentric emphasis and was able to turn outwards, toward the social problems facing the modern man. The Council expressed particular concern for the poor and even hinted a partiality for them. The Church, however, did not break completely with traditional notions, and old ambiguities remained. Concern for the poor was mainly understood within the paternalistic model with them as a passive object of the Church's charity and benevolent action. What was hinted at in the Council, however, had a powerful effect on Latin American Catholicism. At the epochal gathering of the Latin American Bishops at Medellin, for the first time in history, the Latin American Catholic Church consciously expressed its own identity. The bishops did not develop the theme of liberation systematically, but in summoning the Church to hear the cry of the poor, they made a fundamental effort to situate the Church in the context of the dramatic and systemic problems confronting the continent and the Church's role in their solution.

Liberation theology builds on this foundation. Although the movement cannot be properly understood in isolation from its interaction with recent theological trends, contemporary Latin American theology is above all a contextual theology. It emerges as a critical reflection on the situation of dependence in which Latin America is living today. Sensitive to the enormous inequalities existing between the privileged minority and the massive poverty, hunger, starvation malnutrition, illiteracy, infant-mortality and
unemployment spread everywhere in the continent, liberation theologians have become aware of the gigantic forces responsible for the existing conditions. Adopting the current explanation of the causes of under-development being put forward by a new generation of Latin American economists and social theorists, these theologians have focused on what they believe to be the deep roots of poverty in Latin America. Poverty, alienation and misery, far from being something "accidental," which can be eliminated with more "modern techniques," are the result of structural exploitation and systematic despoliation. Therefore, there can be no escape for the poor while these conditions prevail. The answer, thus, cannot be "economic integration" or "development," but liberation.

As the name implies, liberation theology is concerned with the meaning of religion for social and political liberation, and vice versa. Once cloistered and abstract discipline, theological reflection is placed in the context of real social experience and transformed into a reflection on concrete historical situations and struggles of the poor. Liberation theologians insist on the political impact of the gospel. Their historical context, as they perceive it, forces them to reflect on the sociopolitical features of their faith, and leads them to formulate a theological response capable of providing a theological basis for the Church's option for the poor and effective involvement in their struggle for liberation.
CHAPTER II

LIBERATION: THEOLOGY, THE CHURCH AND THE POOR

Although the global context of liberation theology involves the very history of Christianity in Latin America and its impact on society and politics in the area, it was the failure of the programs of development for the continent that provided the immediate setting for the emergence of the revolutionary concept of liberation,1 with its emphasis on radical change. Within Catholic circles sensitive to the appalling Latin American socio-economic structure, described as "sinful"2 and marked by "institutionalized violence,"3 theological reflection entered a new stage. At this juncture, liberation was no longer simply a linguistic anti-development stance. It became a call for "a new way to do theology,"4 a theology which, seeking to address

1In his A Theology of Liberation, Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the most influential proponents of the innovative concept, advances three basic arguments for his preference for the notion of liberation: (1) it highlights the conflictive nature of present reality, i.e., the conflict of poor classes with regard to the wealthy; (2) it implies a new consciousness, which leads human beings to assume conscious responsibility for the determination of their own destinies; (3) it manifests a more profound correspondence with the biblical sources and with the liberating life and death of Christ (see pp. 21-42).

2The Church in the Present-day Transformation, p. 46.

3Ibid., p. 53.

4Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, p. 15.
theological enterprise to the social struggles of the poor, begins and ends with their vision and immediate concerns.

The present chapter attempts to clarify the function and the identity of the "poor" within liberation theological formulation. The discussion is divided into three main sections. First, it deals with liberation theology's methodology and its relationship to the poor. Second, attention is devoted to the ecclesiology which naturally flows from this "new way of doing theology" and provides the context for a clear understanding of liberation's concept of the poor. Finally the focus is placed on the frame of reference of liberation theology, with its underlying assumption that God always takes the side of the poor and reveals himself only in the concrete historical context of their liberation. In this final section, particular attention is given to liberationist use of crucial biblical texts which are taken as the Scriptural support for its revisioning of theological reflection.

Theology from the Perspective of the Poor

In its decision to reverse the role of the Latin American Roman Catholic Church—which traditionally has had its sympathies committed to the rich classes—and give theological interpretation to the engagement of the Church as a whole in the process of liberation, liberation theologians attempt fundamentally to rethink theology from the standpoint of the poor, making them the new locus theologicus. The first step in this approach to theology has been a radical revision of theological methodology, to the examination of which we devote the following pages.
Liberation Theology's Epistemological Break

Perceiving the Latin American economic-political situation not only as a challenge to the Christian conscience but also as an expression of the "signs of the times," which are a theological locus and a summons from God, liberation theologians called into question the traditional task of theological reflection. What

1See John Eagleson, ed., Christians and Socialism (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1975), pp. 163-168. This book provides the documentation of the Conference held in Santiago, Chile, in April 1972, under the theme "Christians for Socialism." The meeting, which gathered four hundred Latin American Christians, among whom were many of the leading Catholic and Protestant Latin American theologians, appeared to move many people to more radical positions, both politically and theologically, regarding the situation of the continent. See also the chapter "The Awakening of the Christian Conscience," in Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, pp. 38-60.

2The Church in the Present-day Transformation, pp. 101, 168. Vatican's II Gaudium et Spes interpreted these signs mainly in reference to change, transformation and progress. In Latin America, however, the "signs of the times" are understood as expressed above all in the social order, which becomes a "theological situation" (ibid., p. 101). For a selected bibliography of writings on "sign of the times," both from Vatican II and Latin American perspectives (see Gutiérrez, A Theology p. 17, n. 29).

3The evident transposition from the sociopolitical reality, at first glance not a theological theme, to the theological realm, two spheres kept in discontinuity within the traditional theological thought, becomes a primary datum for liberation theology. This "qualitative leap," to use the description of Giulio Girardi (cf. Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 71), is basically justified by liberation theology's unitarian vision of history (cf. Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 63-72; 153-187). Although sociopolitical liberation, humanization, and deliverance from sin are differentiated in levels of meanings, they are considered inseparable parts of a single, all-encompassing salvific process (Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 25-37; Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 70). Liberation theologians stress the need of elimination of the temporal-spiritual and profane-sacred antitheses based on the natural-supernatural distinction. Gutiérrez--clearly reflecting the influence of a renewed theology of grace and revelation, which sees mankind as living in a world which

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structure should the methodological and hermeneutical process adopt
that theology may be true to the necessity of the liberation¹ of
those who are exploited, despised, and crushed? In order to give a
proper answer to this basic question, liberation theologians
concluded it was necessary to make a radical change in traditional
theological methodology.²

¹The term liberation, sometimes functioning somewhat as
humanization does within Marxism, signifies the re-creation and total
fulfillment of man, as does the biblical term salvation. Liberation,
however, is untainted by the other-worldly connotations of the term
salvation, and calls attention to the current process by which people
are extricated from their present situation of domination and
dependence.

²The question of theological method, considered the watershed
of contemporary theologies (see "Statement by Beatriz Melano Couch,"
Theology in the Americas, p. 304), has received considerable
attention in recent times. See, for example, Bernard Lonergan, Method
in Theology (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), and David Tracy,
Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology (New York:
Seabury Press, 1975). Since liberation theology presents not so much
a new content as a "new way of doing theology," methodology is a
subject of paramount importance for its formulation. Juan Luis
Segundo even affirms that the "only thing that can maintain the
liberating character of any theology is not its content but its
methodology" (The Liberation of Theology, p. 40). The relevance of
the problem is revealed not only by the fact that methodology was
chosen as the central theme of the 1975 meeting in Mexico City (the
proceedings of the conference are gathered in Liberación y
cautiverio: Debates en torno al método de la teología en América
Latina [Mexico City: Comité Organizador, 1975]) but also by the
number of written works dealing with the subject (see Raúl Vidales,
Cuestiones en torno al método en la Teología de la Liberación [Lima:
MIEC-JELI, 1974]. To the names of Gutiérrez, Assmann, and Segundo,
considered the three most representative liberation theologians on
the question of method (Jesús Vergara Aceves Teología desde el
contexto de la liberación [Zaragoza, Mexico: Estudios Sociales,
Western theology, traditionally carried out from the perspective of philosophical idealism, has been notorious for its abstractness. Generally starting with philosophical and metaphysical categories and primarily interested in interpreting a given set of religious realities, it has become a sort of fuga mundi, almost without any reference to concrete situations. In more recent times, concerned with man's loss of faith in a scientific world, the first question of contemporary theology has been how to talk about God in a 'world come of age'. In Latin America, however—in a situation marked by the overwhelming presence of the poor—since the driving motive in doing theology is not rationality, but transformation, and the interlocutor or "historical subject" of liberation theology is not

1979], p. 20), the name of the Basque Jesuit Jon Sobrino must be added, for the lucidity and cogence in which he treats the subject.

As Kirk remarks, in practice it means that in discovering the meaning of obedience to God's revelation, theoretical thought is always given precedence over concrete involvement in the real world (Theology Encounters Revolution, p. 116).

Sobrino speaks of two moments in the Enlightenment and Christian theology's reaction to it. The first challenge is symbolized by Kant's call for the freeing of human reason from all authoritarianism. In this case, the basic interest is on rationality. According to Sobrino, this has been the force moving Europeans to do theology. On the other hand, the second moment or challenge is symbolized by Marx's understanding of liberation as the transformation of the world, and the freeing of reality from suffering. This is the challenge which liberation theology must deal with, not from some a priori academic choice, but because of the de facto situation of Latin America. "El conocimiento teológico en la Teología europea y latinoamericana," in Liberación y cautiverio, pp. 177-207; see also Sobrino, Resurrección de la verdadera Iglesia (Stander: Editorial Sal Terrae, 1981), pp. 21-53. For a detailed consideration of Sobrino's methodology, see Alfred T. Hennelly, "Theological Method: The Southern Exposure," ThSt 38 (1977):709-735.

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the unbeliever, but the poor,¹—who are perceived as the non-person—the conviction emerged that theology must have a specific function. It could not be a merely scholarly preoccupation with the past, mere repetition of ancient dogmas or even mere critical historical exegesis of Scripture. To be relevant—since the poor are not asking theoretical question about invisible realities and are immediately more interested in life after birth than in life after death—theology could no longer start with classical traditionalist metaphysics,² but from the situation of poverty and oppression in which the majority of Latin Americans sub-exist. This, according to Míguez Bonino, is "the only possible point of departure."³

¹See above, p. 113. In his Teología del Reverso de la Historia (Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1977)—an English translation of this work is provided in The Power of the Poor, pp. 169-221, under the title "Theology from the Underside of History"—Gutiérrez attempts to underline the differences between the method of the progressive wing of Western theology and that of liberation theology. First he devotes his attention to the historical subject of the two approaches. Contemporary theology, he observes, has been articulated within "the modern spirit," which is seen to be marked by bourgeois individualism and rationalism, so that its historical subject is "the new dominant class, the bourgeois class, largely atheistic or skeptical" (p. 178). On the other hand, Gutiérrez attempts to delineate the particular characteristics that surface when theology speaks from the opposite perspective, i.e., from "a world of oppression," and has the poor, "the sectors of society that have been exploited, the races that have been despised, the cultures that have been marginalized" (ibid., p. 193) as its subject.

²Hans Küng, otherwise critical of liberation theology, agrees that under the specific Latin American circumstances, "theology will be understood as something more than an abstract theology." In Latin America, he goes on, theological reflection must be "a theology . . . which is ethically oriented and wholly concentrated on practice: to be more exact, on liberation praxis." On Being a Christian (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1976), p. 564.

³Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 72. For Assmann "the
The first step of the theological task, therefore, was no longer to go to the Bible or to the dogmatic tradition, and only then try to apply a thereby acquired theory to a concrete situation, as it was traditionally conceived within a word-action scheme. In this approach, since the step from theory to practice is often never taken, a severe dichotomy between theory and practice is created and theology becomes simply a word-word scheme. Liberation theology, following the modern understanding of the relation between theory and praxis, took a decisive step to replace this model by an action-word relationship.¹

Traditional theological understanding, which presupposes the existence of an absolute, pre-existing truth independent of its historical effectiveness, came to be rejected. For liberation theolo-

¹See Assmann, Opresión-Liberación, p. 42. For a pertinent discussion on this topic, see Miroslav Volf, "Doing and Interpreting: an Examination of the Relationship between Theory and Practice in Latin American Liberation Theology," pp. 11-19; also Kirk, Theology Encounters Revolution, pp. 117-118.
gians, drawing here mainly from Marx, the basic epistemological assumption is that truth lies not in the realm of ideas but on the historical plane of action. "Action itself is truth."¹ To know the truth--it is further contended on the bases of the theme of "doing the truth" found in the discourses of the Johannine Christ--is to do the truth. From the perception that truth is known not in abstractness but in praxis, in the midst of involvement in history,² follows the affirmation of the priority of right-doing (orthopraxis) over right-thinking (orthodoxy).³

As a result of the reversal of the traditional relationship

¹Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 72. Rejecting the traditional way of knowing which considers truth only as the conformity of the mind to a given contained propositionally in Scripture and tradition, Gutiérrez remarks, "There is another way of knowing truth--a dialectical one. In this case the world is not a static object which the human mind confronts and attempts to understand; rather the world is an unfinished project which is being built. Knowledge is not the conformity of the mind to a given, but an immersion in this process of transformation and construction of a new world." "Where Hunger is, God is not," The Witness (April, 1977):5.

²Sobrino, "El conocimiento teológico," p. 193; Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, pp. 89-90. The idea of knowledge and knowing, liberation theologians point out, has active and participatory content (see Míguez Bonino's discussion of "Hermeneutics, Truth and Praxis," in Doing Theology, pp. 88-95). This notion is clearly evident in Assmann (Opresión-Liberación, p. 87), and Gutiérrez (Praxis de Liberacion y Fe Cristiana [Lima: Centro de Documentación MIEI: JECI, 1973], p. 76). Sobrino remarks that Latin American theology "has tried to recover the meaning of the profound biblical experience of what it means to know theologically: to know the truth is to do truth, to know Jesus is to follow Jesus; to know sin is to dispose of sin, to know suffering is to free the world of suffering, to know God is to go to God in justice" ("El conocimiento teológico," p. 207).

³Gutiérrez, A Theology p. 10.
between theory and practice, a "Copernican change in theology"\(^1\) took place and continuity between this form of theology—defined as "a reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word"\(^2\)—and the "academic" or "classical" theology became hardly possible. With his usual aggressivity Assmann affirms, "The road is cut off to any kind of reflection which represents taking refuge in a verbal world dressed up in ontological density, which reflects man's incapacity to deal with the true problems."\(^3\)

Affirming the primacy of action over thought, and insisting that Christians can think their faith only as they practice it,\(^4\) liberation theology consistently maintains that "active commitment to

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\(^1\)Miguez Bonino, Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age (London: SPCK, 1975), p. 81.

\(^2\)Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 13.

\(^3\)Assmann, Desafío, p. 87.

\(^4\)In contrast to traditional intellectualist and fiducial approaches to faith—the former (common among Roman Catholics), regarding faith as a kind of knowing whose goal is "illumination," and the latter (prevalent in Protestant tradition), stressing the element of personal trust (see Avery Dulles, Survival of Dogma [Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Image, 1973], chapter I, "The changing Forms of Faith," pp. 15-30), liberation theology calls for a third form of faith assent which Dulles describes as "performative" ("The Meaning of Faith Considered in Relationship to Justice," in The Faith That Does Justice, John C. Haughey ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), p. 13. This view insists that faith is not a gnosis, but a way, a particular way of acting (Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 89). Faith, from the perspective of liberation theologians, is a commitment to revolutionary praxis in a historical situation that concretely mediates for them the word of God. Gutiérrez observes that in the Latin American context, "faith has as its starting point a commitment to create a just and human society... Faith thus appears to us ever more as a liberating praxis." "The Hope of Liberation," in Mission Trends No. 3, eds. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), pp. 65-66.
liberation comes first and theology develops from it.\textsuperscript{1} Within this "new way of doing theology," praxis\textsuperscript{2} becomes the matrix that generates theological activity. Gutiérrez holds that theology is reflection on praxis. Theology is a second step, it "follows" or "comes later." In the off-quoted phrase of Hegel, Gutiérrez insists, "it rises at sundown."\textsuperscript{3}

The View from Below

Despite the decisive significance of liberation methodology-

\textsuperscript{1}Gutiérrez, "Two Theological Perspectives," p. 247. "This theology," Gutiérrez remarks, echoing Marx's eleventh thesis against Feuerbach ("Theses on Feuerbach," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, On Religion [New York: Schochen, 1964], p. 72), "does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be a part of the process through which it is transformed" (A Theology of Liberation, p. 15).

\textsuperscript{2}Praxis, it should be noted, is a technical term in Marxism, which embraces those activities capable of transforming reality and society (for a helpful introduction to this topic see Charles Davis, "Theology and Praxis," CrossCur 29 [1973]:154-168). More specifically, praxis is the action that tends to overcome the alienation by which man has become separated from the fruits of his labor; therefore it has revolutionary content directed to changing the Rejecting as "defective" and "alienating" any theory which interprets but does not change reality, Marx elaborated what he called "critical theory." In his thinking, critical theory is dialectically united to revolutionary praxis, i.e. the praxis is informed by the theory, and the theory is shaped by the praxis. Applying these principles to faith, liberation theologians have concluded that the word of God is distorted and alienating whenever it is accepted without commitment to the praxis oriented toward liberation. See Carol S. Robb, Integration of Marxist Constructs into the Theology of Liberation from Latin America (Ph.D. dissertation: Boston University, 1978), pp. 75-110; F. Castillo, El problema de la praxis en la teologia de la liberacion (Münster: Kaiser Verlag, 1976); Gutiérrez, Praxis de Liberación Jorge V. Pixley and Jean P. Bastian, ed. Praxis cristiana y producción theologica (Salamanca: Ediciones Siguíme, 1979); Steven G. MacKen, "Praxis as the Context for Interpretation." JThAfrica 24 [1978]:32-33).

\textsuperscript{3}Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 11. The perception that theology
cal reversal, making praxis the center of gravity around which theological work rotates, liberation theologians perceive that "it is not enough to say that praxis is the first act."¹ Actually the real hermeneutical-methodological novum of liberation theology does not come from the emphasis that theology must arise from praxis, for it is not alone in its praxiological approach to theology.² Rather, it emerges in relation to the historical subject of this praxis.

Gutiérrez observes:

Liberation theology's second central intuition is that God is a liberating God, revealed only in the concrete historical context of liberation of the poor and oppressed. This second point is inseparable from the first . . . It is not enough to know that praxis must precede reflection; we must also realize that the historical subject of that praxis is the poor--the people who have been excluded from the pages of history.

²See McAfee Brown, Gustavo Gutiérrez, pp. 34-35. Matthew L. Lamb, in his article "The Theory-Praxis Relationship in Contemporary Christian Theologies," discusses contemporary Europeans and North American theologians advocating the precedence of praxis over theory; see The Catholic Theological Society of America. Proceedings of the Thirty-First Annual Convention, pp. 157-178. Liberation theologians, however, criticize these theologians because, in spite of their praxis-oriented stance, they want to remain at some neutral or intermediate level in which there is no need to opt for a specific praxis (Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 95).
³Gutiérrez, "The Theological Perspectives," p. 245, emphasis

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At this juncture, the poor are introduced into the theological arena as an integral part of liberation methodology, not merely as the privileged starting point of the theological task, but as the hermeneutical key "to an understanding of the meaning of liberation and of the meaning of the revelation of a liberating God." It is not surprising therefore that for Gutiérrez, "without the poor as subject, theology degenerates into academic exercise," or that "without him [the poor]," as Dussel puts it, "faith becomes ideology, mere doctrine, obscurity."

supplied. The praxis of liberation theology "is not any old praxis, but rather the praxis of the poor" (Brown, Gustavo Gutiérrez, p. 34).

"In fact," Gutiérrez contends, "it [the poor] is the methodological point of departure for all our efforts of theological reflection... Our interface with other contemporary theology is always filtered through this point of departure as a principle of discernment" (The Power of the Poor, p. 219, n. 67). The locus of liberation theology, says Gutiérrez elsewhere, is the poor seeking to be agents of their own history ("Two Theological Perspectives," p. 242; The Power of the Poor, p. 194). Theology must be a reflection from within and upon praxis, but this must be the praxis of liberation of the oppressed. "To divorce theological method from this perspective," Gutiérrez underlines, "would lose the nub of the question and fall back into the academic" (ibid., pp. 200-201).

Ibid., p. 200.

Gutiérrez, "South American Liberation Theology," p. 116. It is Gutiérrez' conviction that if the poor, their vision, and hope are not present, "liberation will be assimilated and co-opted by the system; it will be converted into just a new toy of theologians." "Statement by Gustavo Gutiérrez," in Theology in the Americas, p. 311.

Informed particularly by the conclusions of the sociology of knowledge, liberation theology affirms the inevitable socio-economic constraints on all knowledge and human reflection, including theology and exegesis. "Knowledge," Sobrino points out, "...always contains ... implicitly or explicitly a praxis-related and ethical character." On that basis, liberation theology poses a serious criticism to the claim of "objectivity" and ideological neutrality of the traditional theological enterprise. This insight, further refined, leads to the conclusion that all theological reflection falls on one side or the other of the oppressor-oppressed axis.

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1The basic insight of the sociology of knowledge is that there is no such thing as "autonomous knowledge." As Reinhold Niebuhr says, "All knowledge is tainted with an 'ideological' taint" (The Nature and Destiny of Man [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964], 1:194). In other words, there is no knowledge which would not be closely tied with a given life situation. For a general discussion of the subject, see James E. Curtis and W. Petras, ed. The Sociology of Knowledge: A Reader (New York: Praeger, 1970); also Robin Gill, Theology and Social Structures (Oxford: Mowbrays, 1977), especially chaps. 1 and 2.


3See Stephen Knapp "A Preliminary Dialogue with Gutiérrez' 'A Theology of Liberation,'" in Liberation," in Evangelicals and Liberation, p. 16. Liberation theology's fundamental premise thus is that no one reads the Bible in an ideological vacuum. Theology, then, is always a prisoner of its context and Western theologians, who are for the most part led by the ideal of objectivity, have generally remained unaware of the ways in which their life and practice determine their discipline. For expanded discussion of these issues see Knapp's "Figuez, Gutiérrez: Pivotal Works," Sojourners (September 1976): 34-37.

4Liberation theologians contend that theological reflection arising out of the affluent centers (i.e., Europe and the United
Therefore, limited and conditioned by its historical context of affluence, it is argued, Western or North Atlantic theology, whether consciously or not, has functioned as an ideological instrument of the political ruling classes, to preserve the established order, or to sanctify either reactionary or reformist political options.¹

In Gutiérrez' words, history, thus far, has been interpreted "from the standpoint of the 'winners,' or rulers, or upper classes."² Theology itself has been "written by white, Western bourgeois

¹Segundo argues that "every theology is political, even one that does not speak or think in political terms," The Liberation of Theology, p. 74. The difference between liberation theology and "academic" theology, Segundo goes on to suggest, is that while the latter denies its relationship with politics, the former "consciously and explicitly" accepts it (ibid.). This advocacy instance, however, is strongly objected to by Schubert Ogden, who argues that liberation theologies (whether Latin American, black, or feminist) "typically are not so much theology but witness" because "they tend rather to be the rationalization of positions already taken than the process or product of critical reflection on these positions." Ultimately then, for Ogden, current liberation theologies are enslaved to "subtler forms of bondage," and are in danger of becoming ideologies in the Marxist sense." Faith and Freedom: Toward a Theology of Liberation (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), pp. 33, 116). For a reaction to Ogden's remarks see James H. Cone, "A Critical Response to Schubert Ogden's Faith and Freedom: Toward a Theology of Liberation," PerkinsJ 33 (1979):51-55.

Liberation theology sees as its primary task to reinterpret history and theology to redo, i.e., from the opposite viewpoint, from the perspective of the poor. "Our first job today," Gutiérrez writes "is to reread history in terms of the poor, the humiliated, and the rejected of society." Elsewhere he writes, "We want to do theology from the 'other' [the poor], from a point outside of ourselves." Quoting a compelling text of Bonhoeffer, he summarizes the decision of liberation theology to work from the viewpoint of the poor:

We have learned to see the great events of the history of the world from beneath—from the viewpoint of the useless, the suspect, the abused, the powerless, the oppressed, the despised. In a word, from the viewpoint of the suffering.

Theological reflection from the perspective of the poor,

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1 Leonardo Boff, *Teologia do cativiero e da libertacao* (Lisbon: Multinova, 1976), p. 65; also Gutiérrez, "South American Liberation Theology," p. 117. This charge implies that theology and church traditionally have been class-oriented, defending the interests of some segments of society (the "haves") to the disadvantage of others (the "have-nots"). "Until now," Gutiérrez emphasizes, "Christianity has been linked with a culture, a race, and a certain way of production, and therefore, in great measure with a particular class" ("Statement by Gustavo Gutiérrez" in *Theology in the Americas*, p. 311). In this point liberation theologians follow Marxist theory about religion.

2 What takes place in this process, as suggested by liberation theologians, is an act of deideologization of theology and biblical exegesis, which must be followed by reideologization of them, from the perspective of the poor.


4 Ibid., p. 311.

however, does not occur in a vacuum. Convinced that there is a basic blockage of the word of God—now being held in an in-system captivity as a result of many falsifying mediations in the past, particularly the intrasystematic inclusion of biblical interpretation within the capitalist system—liberation theologians contend that God's summons is not directly accessible. The word of God is mediated today through the cry of the poor.¹ For liberation theologians God is not known in the midst of ontological reflection but in the midst of the poor and their liberating praxis.² If for Niebuhr revelation is unintelligible from the spectators' viewpoint,³ Gutiérrez goes one step further, insisting that only someone adopting the poverty perspective, i.e., the perspective of the poor engaged in the struggle for liberation,⁴ can hear God's Word.⁵ Thus, it becomes clear


²See Miranda, Marx and the Bible, p. 48.


⁴Liberation theologians claim that it is the Christian perspective (Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 287-308; Segundo, The Liberation of Theology, pp. 83-87. Cf. Gudorf, pp. 60-61).

⁵For Gutiérrez, the participation in the process of liberation "will be heard nuances of the Word of God which are imperceptible in other existential situations and without which there can be no authentic and fruitful faithfulness to the Lord" (A Theology, p. 49).
that theology, as proposed by the Latin American liberationists, is dependent not only upon theological commitment to the poor but upon a political commitment to their struggle.

The liberative praxis,\(^1\) understood almost as the exclusive locale of God's revelation, becomes the place of a new experience of the faith, a new spirituality, a new proclamation of the gospel,\(^2\) and the privileged locus of theological reflection. It is in the context of the subversive (i.e., from below) praxis of the poor—which according to Gutierrez must bring about a social appropriation of the gospel\(^3\)—that theological reflection must take place, giving expression to a re-reading of the biblical message in terms of the oppressed.\(^4\) In the words of Dussel:

1As indicated earlier, praxis (a term hardly used universally by liberation theologians) generally refers to practical political commitment to the struggle for the liberation of the poor. It is, however, more than merely involvement in a situation or "practice." It is a particular kind of involvement (i.e., class struggle), informed by a particular kind of analysis (i.e., Marxist), within the historical situation. Theology as 'critical reflection on praxis in the light of faith' points to an ongoing interplay of reflection and action. "This reflection is used to guide continuing praxis in a new channel. Further reflection on this altered praxis results in a new theology, which then continues to correct and guide praxis" (Gudorf, Catholic Social Teachings, p. 6).


3Ibid.

4Liberation theology does not only ask "What is theology?" but "Who does it?" Who can "speak" theologically? Whose voice has a right to be heard? There is no question that for liberation theologians it is the voice of those who have had "no voice," the poor, the despised, the humiliated, since they have a more acute perception of reality and are closer to God (see Michael L. Cook, "Jesus from the Other Side of History: Christology in Latin America," ThSt 44 [1983].
After the great theology of Christianity from the fourth to the fifteenth century and modern European theology from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, the theology of liberation of the periphery and of the oppressed is in fact the whole of traditional theology set into redemptive motion from the point of view of the poor.

In summary, while traditional Western theology, mainly done under the contextual influence of bourgeois Aufklärung and philosophical idealism, seeks to overcome the dualism between religion and society within the world of thought, Latin American theology seeks to overcome that dualism through the reality of human history. Thus, while the former has its issues from the theoretical and cognitive level, the latter takes its point of departure from the historical and political concreteness of the poor and oppressed. This epistemological shift, as we saw, breaks a new ground for the function of theological reflection. Furthermore, the implications of a theology whose purpose is not to interpret reality but to be at the service of the process by which reality is transformed evidently are critical for ecclesiology and missiology. As we will discuss in the following section, not only theology but the Church also is challenged to rethink itself, its mission and pastoral action "from below," from the perspective of the poor and their struggles.

**The Church and the Poor**

According to Gutiérrez, a characteristic feature of Latin

259-260. Liberation theology, as Gutiérrez says, is done "primarily by history's nameless ones. Hence it makes little difference whose name appears on articles and books" (The Power of the Poor, p. 204).

America in recent years is the "real and exacting discovery of the world of the other: the poor man, the exploited class, and despised cultures." This discovery, marked by a new understanding of the harsh realities of the continent, led those committed to the process of liberation to a clear perception of the inadequacies of the Church's structures for the world in which it lives, and the need for innovative ecclesial presence, beyond all ecclesiocentrism and institutional rigidity, oriented by new experiences and new modes of evangelization.

Faithful to its theological methodology, from within its

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2Gutiérrez, The Power of the Poor, p. 30. Not too long ago the Latin American Roman Catholic Church was described as "an outdated European importation, a relic of a bygone age." Ronan Hoffmann, "Social Change in Latin America: The Mission of the Church," CIF Reports 6 (1967):66; see also George Lane "Social Revolution in the New Latin America: A Catholic Appraisal," HAHist 47 (1967):248. Berryman observes that initially after Vatican II, Latin American simply received the conciliar ecclesiological themes, but soon dawned the realization that in theology and pastoral reflection the countries of the "periphery" were imported from the (European) "center" just as in all other spheres of culture. There appeared an anti-European reaction and a search for a more indigenous ecclesiology ("Latin American Liberation Theology," ThSt p. 377).


4The first chapter of this study attempts to underline that traditional Catholic ecclesiology became a major cause in determining the Church's alliance with the rich segments of society. In other words, theological reflection determined the church's practice. In the case of liberation theology, however, we have an inverted situation. Since theology is the "second act," ecclesiology flows from pastoral praxis (see Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 11). It is active solidarity with the oppressed that determines the ecclesiological model. These two approaches, grounded
active commitment to praxis,¹ liberation theology has attempted to redefine the understanding of the Church, to overcome the traditional ecclesiocentric and conservative vision of the Church's presence in the continent. Focusing on the key role it must carry in its participation in the struggle for liberation and justice, the theologians of liberation demand a complete "uncentering of the Church"² and outline a radical ecclesiology in stark contrast to the one which has been operative for centuries in Latin America.

A New Ecclesiological Perspective

To give theological interpretation to the engagement of the Church in behalf of the poor and their cause, liberation theology seeks first to bridge the huge gap between the "normal" life of faith opposing epistemological presuppositions, consequently exhibit irreconcilable differences concerning the understanding of the nature and mission of the Christian community. It seems that recent attempts at constructing ecclesiological models have not paid adequate attention to the basic question of epistemology (see, for example McBrien, The Remaking of the Church, and Dulles, Models of the Church). A more viable approach is suggested by Barrien A. Wilson, "Ecclesiological Models: An Epistemological Examination," Encount 40 (1979):327-339; also Paul G. Hiebert, "The Missiological Implications of an Epistemological Shift," TSFBul 8 (May-June 1985):12-18.

¹For liberation theologians, the Church's pastoral action is not arrived at as a conclusion from theological premises. Theology does not lead to pastoral activity, but is, rather, a reflection on it. See Gutiérrez, "Notes for a Theology of Liberation," ThSt 31 (1971): 144-145. For this reason, Gutiérrez insists that if the Church wishes to deal with the real question of the modern world and to attempt to respond to them, it must open a new chapter of theologico-pastoral epistemology. Thus "instead of using only revelation and traditions as starting points... it must start with facts and questions derived from the world and from history (A Theology, p. 12).

²Gutiérrez, p. 261.
and the revolutionary commitment advocated by its proponents. Gutiérrez, in particular, addresses himself to the question of relationship between the Church's mission and social praxis, between salvation and the process of liberation. He starts his vision of the Church with the fundamental affirmation that all ecclesiology must be rooted in a proper understanding of salvation. The Church's traditional notion of salvation—which, tainted with near-exclusively other-worldly connotations, became a sort of flight from reality—is radically challenged by liberation theology's radical rejection of any split between the spiritual and the material.

Salvation in history

Salvation from the perspective of liberation theologians "is not something other-worldly, in regard to which the present life is merely a test. "Salvation--the communion of men with God and the communion of men among themselves--is something which embraces all human reality, transforms it and leads it to its fullness in Christ." Understood as an "intra-historical reality," salvation

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1 Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 256.

2 We have indicated earlier the reasons why Latin American theologians have replaced the term "salvation" by "liberation" (above p. 127, n. 1). Gutiérrez distinguishes three levels of salvation: political, historical and spiritual (A Theology, pp. 36, 37). Although differentiated in levels of meanings, they are to be seen, however, as parts of a single, complex process, interdependent and fiding their deepest sense and full realization in the saving work of Christ (see above p. 129, n. 3).

3 Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 150-151.

4 Ibid., p. 152. As noted earlier (above, pp. 56-60), the
can no longer refer to another realm separate and distinct from the real material conditions of human life.\(^1\) Oriented to the transformation of human reality in history, salvation begins here on earth.

Traditional theological tendency to separate the natural from the supernatural generally reduced salvation to an extra-historical and transcendent ideal, completely divested of any historical and social meaning. In recent times, however, the concept of salvation has undergone redefinitions which tend to place it within a secular and humanistic framework. See Roger E. Hedlund, Roots of the Great Debate in Mission (Madras, India: Evangelical Literature Service, 1981), Chapter eleven. At Vatican II a decisive shift is also noticeable. Attention was focused more definitely on intrahistorical concerns and the term supernatural is scarcely used by the Council (it is not used at all in Gaudium et Spes). The term preferred is integral "which tends to stress the unity of the call to salvation" (Gutiérrez, ibid., p. 72). Liberation theology radicalizes the view of salvation adopted at Vatican II (see Gutiérrez, A Theology, chapter nine). In an article discussing soteriological views in current theologies, Donald Bloesch observes that "the heart of liberation theology is that salvation lies in the struggle for political and economic liberation" ("Soteriology in Contemporary Christian Thought," Interpretation 335 [1980]:137). Although the liberation view of salvation is not limited to the political and economic deliverance of the oppressed, here is where the emphasis falls (see below).

\(^1\) Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 71-72. This does not mean that Gutiérrez denies the reality of anotherworldly salvation—there are sufficient qualifying comments to suggest that this is not his intent—but clearly he does not deal with that aspect. Costas remarks that although Gutiérrez speaks of liberation as taking place at three levels: the political, the psychological and the religious or spiritual, and argues that the three are part of a single salvific process, nevertheless he rarely goes beyond the political in his exposition of liberation. Christ Outside the Gate (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1982), p. 129; Kirk makes a similar observation, Liberation Theology, p. 59). In defense of Gutiérrez, McAfee Brown argues that the reason he (Gutiérrez) devotes "less qualitative attention to [the] third level than the other two . . . is . . . that most other theologies devote inordinate attention to it; its importance is widely acknowledged" (Gustavo Gutiérrez, p. 52-53). For Gutiérrez's answer to the accusation, often heard, that liberation theology is a "political reductionism," see "The Praxis of Liberation," pp. 397-398.
In the construction of the historical project. Since the liberation which Christ offers is universal and integral, embracing all men and the whole man, it is not without political consequences; therefore, it is not limited to a purely "spiritual plane." For Gutiérrez, "the liberating action of Christ is at the heart of the historical current of humanity, the struggle for a just society is in its own right very much a part of salvation history."

Implicit in liberation's soteriological understanding is also the affirmation of the universality of God's salvific will. This notion, however, although reflecting the influence of contemporary Catholic thought--derived mainly from Karl Rahner's view of an "anonymous Christianity" and incorporated in the theology of Vatican II--goes beyond the idea of the possibility of salvation outside the visible frontiers of the Church. Affirming the presence of grace in

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4. See Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 151-152; 190-194; Segundo, The Community Called Church, pp. 29-30.
6. See Lumen Gentium, no. 16; Gaudium et Spes, nos. 3, 11, 22, 57, 59, 61, 54, 75, 91, and Ad Gentes, nos. 7, 8.
all people, Gutiérrez reaches the conclusion that "we can no longer speak properly of a profane world"\(^1\) or, as he states later in his *A Theology of Liberation*, "Since God has become man, humanity, every man, history, is the living temple of God. The 'pro-fane,' that which is located outside the temple, no longer exists."\(^2\) This being the case, salvation is no longer a "quantitative and extensive" issue (i.e., how many will be saved, and the role which the Church plays in this process), but rather a "qualitative and intensive" one (i.e., a matter of how to exercise the saving grace that has been made extensive to everyone in the Christ event).\(^3\) While the quantitative

\(^1\)Gutiérrez, *A Theology*, p. 151.

\(^2\)Gutiérrez, *A Theology*, p. 154. For a helpful discussion on the concept of universalism, see G. C. Berkower, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 387-423. For a strong critique of the notion see Michael Griffiths, *The Church & World Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), pp. 715-743. Costas points out that the notion of universal salvation which undergirds Gutiérrez' thought "cannot be squared with the witness of Holy Scripture. While it is true that the New Testament witnesses to a universal salvation, it does so against the backdrop of God's judgment and in the context of the gospel's call to faith and repentance." As Costas concludes, "Biblical universalism is dialectical; it encompasses grace and judgment. In Jesus Christ, sin has been overcome and grace revealed. Hence salvation can be appropriated and judgment avoided by turning from sin (repentance) and trusting in him (faith) through the enabling power of God's Spirit" (*Christ Outside the Gate*, p. 130). In short, although incarnation has made all men savable, salvation is not independent of personal faith in Christ (John 3:16), which in turn can hardly be equated with the "attempt to build up this world," as Gutiérrez suggests (*A Theology*, p. 71). Furthermore, does Gutiérrez' affirmation that "each man is the a living temple of God" include the oppressors? If "the profane no longer exists," how is the state of misery and oppression of the poor to be explained? (see B. Kloppenburg, *The People's Church* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977), pp. 100-105.

\(^3\)Gutiérrez, *A Theology*, pp. 151-152.
approach stresses the individual, ecclesiocentric and futuristic aspects of salvation, the qualitative emphasizes its corporate, universal, and current dimensions. From all this emerges the inevitable conclusion: stripped of the monopoly of the means of grace and redemption, the Church must cease "considering itself as the exclusive place of salvation, and orient itself toward a new and radical service to mankind."^1

Denying any claim of ecclesial universality based on spatial notions, liberation theologians place the question into a new context. Limited by God's own incarnation, Segundo contends, the church will always be a particular reality.2 Its universal significance, then, must be understood dynamically, in terms of vocation and special task, doing the works of love in the world, being in the service of men, and making manifest to the rest of humanity with whom it makes its way the message of God's plan for

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1Ibid., p. 261.

2Segundo, The Community Called Church, p. 5. Therefore, the Church must not expect that it will become universal, or that eventually all mankind will enter it. "This entity [the church] which is a specific and particular reality within mankind must have been created for humanity . . . [in fact] this is the case, not the opposite. Humanity was not created to enter a particular reality which it overflows at every turn" (p. 6). In fact, Segundo seems to affirm that there is no advantage for the Church to seek to bring within its boundaries the masses. It would affect the purity of its sign function. For Segundo the Church aids only those who belong to it when their membership corresponds with the function the Church is called to exercise (chapter 4, "Obligation of the Ecclesial Community," pp. 78-86; cf. Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, pp. 69-65). Segundo apparently has reduced membership in the Church to an elite group. This has led to the charge of "elitism" (Dunn, Missionary Theology, pp. 227-28; T. H. Sanks and B. H. Smith, "Liberation Ecclesiology: Praxis, Theory, Praxis" ThSt 38 [1977]:10).
Moreover, as the "reflectively Christified" portion of the world, it is the Church's function to manifest to the world the possibility of communion among men and men with God in its life and actions.

The Church is thus essentially a visible sign and sacrament of liberation of men and history. As such it does not exist for itself. It has no meaning in itself except in the measure in which it is able to signify the reality in function of which it exists. What does this understanding of the Church mean for the ecclesial community in the concrete situation of Latin American with its struggles for liberation and a just society? It means that the Church should find its mission in signifying the reality of

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1 According to Segundo, the Church is that portion of humanity which knows the message of God's plan for the world (The Community Called Church pp. 15, 29-30). Yet it does not know for its own sake. It must translate and pass on to men this message—which is "something that is to be grasped, comprehended, and incorporated to a greater or lesser degree into the fashioning of history and the world" (ibid., p. 81)—confident that in doing so some who are "implicit" Christians may become "explicit" ones. For a brief discussion and critique of Segundo's ecclesiology see Dunn, pp 226-230; Sanks and Smith, "Liberation Ecclesiology" pp. 8-11.

2 Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 261. Vatican II had already conceived the Church as the sacrament of salvation (Lumen Gentium, nos. 1, 48; Gaudium et Spes, no. 45). This notion, considered the most important milestone of Vatican II in the field of dogmatic theology (see K. Rahner, The Christian of the Future [Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1964], p. 82), however, did not win the acceptance of all theologians for it was feared that it would lead to "reducing ecclesiology to the study of outward elements" (Jerome Hamer, The Church Is a Communion [New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964], p. 88). The Council, Gutiérrez insists, did not place itself totally in this line of thinking. "Many of the texts still reveal the burden of a heavy heritage; they timidly point to a way out from this turning in of the Church on itself, without always accomplishing this" (A Theology, p. 259).
salvation, in becoming a visible sign of the presence of the Lord in the effort to break with an unjust social order, to liberate and humanize the oppressed.¹

The Church and the world

For liberation theologians the traditional notion expressed by the formula "the Church and the world" has functioned as a dualism which has served to cut the Church off from history: supernatural and natural, salvation history and secular history, the sacred and the profane, eternity and time. Thus rejecting traditional answers to the question of the relationship between the Church and the world,² liberation theologians stress that this bifurcation becomes an "outworn phrase that should be replaced by 'Church in the world' or 'Church of the world'."³ For Gutiérrez, the Church is not a non-world or an "order apart"—the order of salvation and holiness in

¹We further elaborate on this point below.

²Liberation theologians reject the "Christendom model" in which the Church—practically identified with the Kingdom of God—left secular reality subordinate to the Church's interests, lacking autonomy, founding its purpose and fulfillment in the Church (see above, pp. 37-44; cf. Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 53-61). The revised Thomistic "distinction-of-planes" model of Catholic liberalism—which distinguished between what is religious and what is worldly—is also rejected. These approaches are to be replaced by the liberation model, the humanized church (Gutiérrez, pp. 53-131; see Dunn's evaluation of Gutiérrez' ecclesiology, pp. 245-248, also Sanks and Smith, pp. 12-16); Harvie M. Coon, "The Mission of the Church," in Evangelicals & Liberation, pp. 80-82; Coon, "Theologies of Liberation: An Overview," p. 361.

³Hugo Assmann, Practical Theology of Liberation (London: Search Press, 1975), p. 91; also Dussel, History and the Theology of Liberation, p. 154. This understanding puts theology on the track of
the world.\(^1\) Rather the Church "must turn to the world, in which Christ and his Spirit are present and active; the Church must allow itself to be inhabited and evangelized by the world . . . The theology of the Church in the world should be complemented by a theology of the world in the Church."\(^2\) Since for Gutiérrez history is one,\(^3\) the "frontiers between the life of faith and temporal works, a new way of conceiving the relation between the historical Church and the world. See, for example, Segundo's contrast between his understanding of the Church in relation to the world with that expressed in Leo XIII's Immortale Dei, where the Church is seen as a supernatural society complete and juridically perfect, that passes judgment on the world (The Community Called Church, p. 131).

\(^1\)Gutiérrez asserts that this view is, by and large, the one that dominates the theology of Vatican II, though there are insights in Gaudium et Spes and Lumen Gentium that transcend a "rigid distinction of planes" (A Theology, p. 72).

\(^2\)Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 260-261. Liberation theologians, however, are severely criticized for blurring the distinction between Church and world (see Coon, "The Mission of the Church," p. 81; Stott, Christian Mission, pp. 93-94). This identification, Stott remarks, has no biblical foundation; "on the contrary, the New Testament authors constantly contradict this notion by insisting on the distinction between those who are in Christ and those who are not" (p. 94; see also Michael Griffith's discussion "The Confusion of the Church and the World," in The Church & World Mission, pp. 109-144).

\(^3\)Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 153-167. Arguing from a theological standpoint which attempts to eliminate all dualism, liberation theology affirms that all history is unified. There is no separate salvation history. All history must be understood as a general history of salvation. This strong emphasis on the unity of history represents in a sense a protest against traditional conceptions in theology, which reduced God's saving intervention to a narrow strand of history, i.e., the history of the Jews, before Christ, and the affairs of the Christian Church afterwards, without any relevance to the reality where men exist, with its political structures, as well as economic and social dispositions. This concept of a single history, however, has attracted strong criticism. See Kloppenburg, The People's Church, pp. 100-105. Peter Wagner remarks that the
between Church and world, become more fluid in both directions . . . to participate in the process of liberation is already, in a certain sense, a salvific work. ¹

In short, consistent with the historical orientation which pervades their writings, liberation theologians stress that there is a solidarity of the Church with the world. The salvation to which the Church witnesses is intimately related to the liberation of man on the political level. The mission of the Church, therefore, is determined more by the political context of the society in which it exists than by intraecclesiastical concerns. ² Living in a world of social revolution, the identity, ecclesial structures, and the task of the Church as well as its approach to society, must be defined in relation to the Latin American reality. Where does all this leave the Church's transcendence? There is no question that for the theologians of liberation it is only becoming immanent to the world that the Church will really witness to its transcendence; conversely,

liberation monistic vision of history fails "to come to grips with the biblical concept of a temporal spiritual dualism in which the supernatural forces of evil play a sinister and important part" (Latin American Theology, p. 42). Furthermore, if everything is salvation history, as liberation theologians claim, one is tempted to agree with Morris Inch's remark that "then, nothing is salvation history, and man as a whole remains alienated from God" (Doing Theology Across Cultures [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982], p. 68). Liberation theologian Juan Carlos Scannone admits that the relationship between profane history and the history of salvation "has not yet been thoroughly worked out from the new viewpoint." "The Theology of Liberation: Evangelic or Ideological" Conc 3 (March 1974):150.

¹Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 72.
²Ibid., p. 138.
failure at immanence only reveals an inappropriate transcendence.

The Church for the Poor

Perhaps the strongest and most shocking feature of recent developments in Latin American Roman Catholicism is the assertion that the Church, during most of its life in the continent, was transformed into a Church of the rich, far removed from the world of the poor who make up the majority of the population of Latin America.¹ Belonging to the same criticism but presenting further radical overtones is the affirmation that having its sympathies linked with a thin, excessively wealthy upper stratum, the Latin American Catholic Church has sanctioned the use of the gospel for satisfying the religious needs of the masses, thus definitely contributing to "sacramentalize" and secure a social order which is set up and dominated by a few.²

In reaction to this situation, from the bulk of the writings of liberation theologians emerges an overwhelming emphasis on the


²Throughout the history of the continent, conservative political forces have used the Church and the role of religion as moral stabilizing forces, the guardians of traditional values and as a means of preserving "law" and "order," which generally meant the "law" and the "order" of the oppressors (see Costas, Theology of the Crossroads, p. 81). Religion has been misused to sacramentalize the status quo and to interpret backward political policies as the "will of God." S. Galiléa, "Pastoral popular, liberación y política," in Pastoral Popular y Liberación en America Latina, Colección IPLA 14 (Quito: Departamento de Pastoral CELAM, 1972), p. 29.
need for the Church to shift sides and to convert itself to another world, i.e., the world of the poor.\(^1\) Convinced that in Latin America the Catholic Church—contrary to its counterparts in highly secularized Western countries, which are increasingly becoming de-Christianized—still holds a direct and explicit socio-cultural relevance for society,\(^2\) liberation theologians in opposition to a disincarnate and purely "religious" image of the Church have strongly defended an ecclesiological vision capable of enlisting the weight of the Church's influence in hastening the social transformation in the continent. For the Church to turn in on itself, to fail to place itself squarely with the poor within the revolutionary process of liberation, would be its greatest omission. In fact, for Gutiérrez, "not to exercise this influence in favor of the oppressed is really to exercise it against them."\(^3\)

It should be noted that when liberation theologians convoke


\(^2\)Pierro Bigo, a French Jesuit commentator on Catholic social thought, recently wrote from Colombia, where he had been teaching: "I am notably struck by the enormous difference between Latin America and Europe from the point of view of the Christian faith. One still lives here in a Christian milieu." After a description of European religious indifference he concludes, "In Latin America, on the other hand, we walk in a Christian atmosphere. One can base himself on faith. Unbelief is the exception." On the Service of Faith and New Cultures (Rome: Jesuit Curia, 1978), p. 32. Not surprisingly, for L. Boff "the future of the Catholic Church... is undeniably in Latin America" Jesus Christ Liberator (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1972), p. 44. W. Buhlmann, The Coming of the Third Church, p. 22 and J. González, The History of Christianity, 2 vols. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 2:397.

\(^3\)Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 139. The image of the church which

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the Church to place its social weight in the cause of the liberation of the poor and oppressed, they are not calling for a revolutionary departure from the Church's practice. The only revolutionary element would be the use of the Church's power on a new side, i.e., that of the poor, from whom it has been estranged most of its history in Latin America. Reflecting its new-found prophetic awareness, the Church must side with those who suffer violence and are oppressed by unjust systems and structures. To be true to its vocation, it must make its presence felt in the midst of a world of suffering "by proclaiming the Good News to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, and joy to the afflicted."^1

Coherent with this emphasis, there is in the ecclesiological formulation of the theologians of liberation, as we have already hinted, a theological primacy of human liberation over intra-church concerns. Since Latin Americans are interested "not so much in the Church as in the person whom the Church must help, create and humanize,"^2 the stress falls on the priority of the anthropological element over the ecclesiological. The poor and their struggle, thus, does not intervene in the temporal order came to be seen as an idealistic abstraction. For liberation theology, the Church's position is never neutral; any "claim to noninvolvement in politics . . . is nothing but a subterfuge to keep things as they are" (p. 256). Therefore, now that the poor and exploited classes are making their voices heard within the Church, to return to its "purely religious function" would mean to "legitimize the status quo" (pp. 272-279).


^2Boff, Jesus Christ Liberator, p. 44.
are the force that determines not only the self-understanding of the Church and the content of its agenda, but also the Church's approach to socio-political-economic realities. At this juncture it seems inescapable that liberation theology has essentially shifted the question of the Church from: "What is the Church?" to "Why the Church?"

Vatican II and papal encyclicals had gone some distance toward legitimating the Church's direct involvement with the problems of the poor and their struggle against oppression. But the positions taken remained mainly on the level of abstraction. Gutiérrez points out that the "Constitution of the Church in the Modern World" from Vatican II spoke of poverty, injustice, and the need to develop poor countries, but only in vague terms. In spite of conciliar documents which focused on the question of the Church taking an interest in the situation of the poor, "the concept of the poor remained without precision" and was still framed within traditional spiritualizing notions. The Council's "Church for the poor," therefore, is fundamentally conceived in paternalistic terms. The emphasis is on the Church itself, with the poor as the object of its charity and

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2Miguel Bonino, "Ecclesia Pauper," p. 141. The Council describes the poor as the "needy," the "suffering," the "weak," the "sick," notions that for Bonino can be applied to any level of existence (ibid). The poor, therefore, are seen as those in a condition of general deprivation and not as a precise socio-economic category.

3Pp. 144-145; see above, pp. 88-90.
social service. At Medellín a fundamental shift is advanced: the focus moves from the Church to the Latin American world.¹ The terminology began taking on a more rigorous and precise character, both in the socioeconomic and theological dimensions.² Medellín, however, was only the starting point of the process.

To express the Church's function for the poor in terms of the concrete historical realities in which it finds itself in present-day Latin America, liberation theology, however, goes beyond the general level of pastoral orientation. To be effective in its commitment to the oppressed, the Church must understand and unmask the oppressive structural forces that work against them and condition their situation. The careful factual analysis of the society's socio-political-economic reality came to be seen as a "precondition for change."³ Thus, it is through the instrumental use of social analysis that theological reflection and the Church gain a precise understanding of the questions to which they must respond, in order to enable Christians to test and strengthen the efficacy of their obedience.


²Míguez Bonino began to perceive the Latin American situation of poverty through the lens of socioeconomic analysis (see The Church in the Present-day, pp. 46-50; above, p. 111 n. 1; Míguez Bonino, Ecclesia Pauper, pp. 142-145). Furthermore, the Medellín documents tried to avoid traditional spiritualization of the problem of poverty and solidarity of the Church with the poor (ibid.)

The Church and the Identity of the Poor

As we have indicated earlier, Western theology has fairly consistently cast theology into philosophical molds. Under the influence of Greek rationalism, theologians have sought to relate faith to contemporary thought patterns rather than to socioeconomic and political problems, tending, therefore, to overlook the life-death issues that the larger segment of society faces in daily life. At this point—since the poor are conditioned by the social rather than by the philosophical—Latin American liberation theology breaks with former theologies. Contrary to traditional philosophical approaches to reality, liberation theologians, led by the inescapable presence of overwhelming poverty in the Latin American continent, have chosen the social sciences as partners for dialogue, endorsing the Marxist analysis of the Latin American situation in terms of


2Starting with the poor and committed to change the oppressive structures, liberation theologians direct their attention to a different set of tools to assist them in expressing their understanding of social reality and the gospel itself. See Luis Adalberto Gómez de Souza, "Los condicionamientos socio-políticos actuales de la teología en América Latin," in Ruiz Maldonado, Liberación y cautiverio, pp. 69-81.

3According to Berryman, in Latin America it "is the reality itself which impels Christians to go back to Marx" ("Latin American Liberation theology," p. 374). Lernoux also notes that "Marx helped Latin Americans to clarify their situation of neocolonial dependence on capitalism," particularly through the "knowledge of its reality which is the first step in the transformation of society" ("The Long

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the domination theory and class struggle. The Marxist theme of the


It should be noted, however, that one detects a discernable difference among liberation theologians regarding the level of appropriation of Marxism (see Stephen Knapp, "Miguez, Gutierrez: Pivotal Works, p. 33). Furthermore, despite a widespread negative impression, liberation theologians are not doctrinaire Marxists, or uncritical in their adoption of Marxist categories. See, for example, Miguez Bonino, Christians and Marxists. The Mutual Challenge to Revolution (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976); Segundo, The Liberation of Theology, pp. 13-19; J. Emmette Weir, "Liberation Theology, Marxist or Christian?" ExposT 90 (1978):260-275; Harvie M. Coon, "Theologies of Liberation: An Overview," p. 372. MacAfee Brown argues that Marxism may be considered from three different perspectives: first, as a world-view, an all-encompassing framework including historical materialism, the inevitability of class struggle, economic determinism, strong critique to religion, etc.; second, not so much as a total world-view, but as a plan for political action; and third, chiefly as an instrument of social analysis (Theology in a New Key, p. 66). Brown underlines that the majority of liberation theologians adopt Marxism only as an instrument of social analysis (ibid.; see also Spohn, What Are they Saying About Scripture and Ethics, p. 57).

While Brown apparently tends to separate "class struggle" from "social analysis," giving the impression that the former is not implied in the latter, less sympathetically Stephen Neil criticizes liberation theologians for accepting the Marxist analysis of society with its underlying notion of class struggle in toto, "hook, line and sinker" (Salvation Tomorrow [Nashville: Abingdon, 1976], p. 82). For an enlightening discussion of liberation appropriation of Marxism see Joseph Laishley "Theological Trends: The Theology of Liberation," The Way 17 (1977):217-228; 301-311. The pressing question posed to liberation theology, however, is whether it can use Marxism as a tool of sociological analysis without at the same time adopting its concept of life, anthropology, view of history and political solution. To this issue we return later.
dialectic of history with its implicit notion that society is sharply divided into two groups, the oppressors and the oppressed,\(^1\) appears, in fact, to supply an effective method for producing liberation in a situation which hitherto had managed to neutralize all progressive forces for change.\(^2\) Social class analysis in terms of the Marxist vision is felt necessary to prevent the co-optation of the term "oppressed," and to insure that the liberation to be won is real liberation from the real oppression of material poverty.

To prevent the spiritualization of the terms poor and poverty, so common in traditional church exegesis, and the deflection of the

\(^1\)According to Marxism, the history of humanity demonstrates a coherent pattern and development. All relationships between people are founded on the relationship of the means of production (Marx, The 1844 Manuscripts, cf. B. Ollmann, Alienation: Marx's Critique of Man in Capitalist Society [Cambridge: University Press, 1972], chapts. 2 and 3); and these relationships, due to the monetary system of exchange in society, have given rise to the class struggle. For Marx "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto [New York: Monthly Review Press, 1964], pp. 2-57; for a summary see Hans-Lutz Poetsch, Marxism & Christianity [St. Louis, M.O.: Concordia Publishing House, 1973] pp. 28-44). Society thus consists of two groups: the oppressors and the oppressed. Only two classes stand against each other: bourgeoisie and proletariat (Communist Manifesto, p. 61).

\(^2\)Gutiérrez describes that as he began to work, serving the poor in a very traditional nonpolitical way, he discovered three facts: "I discovered that poverty was a destructive thing, something to be fought against and destroyed . . . I discovered that poverty was not accidental . . . but the result of a structure . . . Thirdly I discovered that poor people were a social class." From this understanding, he says, "it became crystal clear that in order to serve the poor, one had to move into political action" (Theology in the Americas, p. 278). At this stage, Gutiérrez seems to have turned to Marxism as an instrumental tool. Liberation theologians, accept Marxist economic analysis of the functioning of society as the most coherent and rational account of the Latin American situation at present (Coon "Theologies of Liberation," p. 399).
liberation movement, the identity of the poor and the character of their situation, therefore, is determined "scientifically" by Marxist analysis of the Latin America economic and political context. It is through the "class struggle," the cornerstone of the Marxist vision of history, that the poor are defined. As Gutiérrez affirms, "liberation theology categorizes people not as believers or unbelievers but as oppressors or oppressed."\(^1\)

This vision of the world where the Latin American Catholic

\(^1\) Gutiérrez, "South American Liberation Theology," p. 110. Throughout Gutiérrez' works there is an evident interchangeability of several terms which describe to those who are oppressed. The "poor," the "workers in the class struggle," the "needy," those "cheated of the fruits of their labor," the "exploited and plundered social class," the "alienated," the "dispossessed," all these terms emerge with few indications that they are not synonymous. Gutiérrez does provide, however, a definition of the poor which indicates it is a category strongly marked by Marxist overtones. "The poor person is the oppressed one, the one marginated from society, the member of the proletariat struggling for his most basic rights; he is the exploited and plundered social class, the country struggling for its liberation" (A Theology, p. 300). Elsewhere, with more clarity, he states the convergence of his term "poor" with Marx's "proletariat": "the poor oppressed person belongs to a social class which is exploited, subtly or openly, by another social class. It is an exploited social class which has in the proletariat the most successful and belligerent sector. To make a choice for the poor person is to opt for one social class against another. It is to become aware of the fact of class confrontation and to take the side of the dispossessed. To make a choice for the poor person is to enter the world of the exploited social class with its values and cultural categories. It is to become one of them in their interests and their struggles" ("Praxis of Liberation," p. 7). Gutiérrez here leaves little doubt about who the poor are in his mind. Furthermore, interpreting their situation terms of Marxist categories, he also has used Marxist analysis of the systemic roots of poverty to inform what it means to make an option for the poor. See Carol S. Robb, Integration of Marxist Constructs, pp. 130-131. E. Dussel, Método para una Filosofía de la Liberación (Salamanca: Ediciones Sigüíme, 1974), p. 225; Miguez Bonino, Toward a Christian Political Ethics (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 101-103.
Church finds itself, naturally, as one might expect, puts on the Church's agenda a radical view of its participation in the Missio Dei. The Church must move out from its ghetto place in culture, and participate in the revolutionary process, an involvement which bears the "Marxist sense of participation in the class struggle to bring about the creation of a new socialist society." Since the existence of the poor as demonstrated by social analysis, "is not politically neutral or ethically innocent," an effective option for the poor demands not merely lyrical and vague appeals in defence of "human dignity," or even generous actions, but political charity, a decisive political stance against the deep roots of poverty, which presents itself in flat contradiction to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As Gutiérrez sees it, Christian love and solidarity with the oppressed, to be relevant, must manifest itself in class option. Neutrality in the class polarization is unthinkable. Such a


Gutiérrez, "Liberation Theology and Proclamation," p. 59; "Faith as Freedom," p. 34. "The poor person is the byproduct of the system" (ibid.), the result of exploitation and greed. Poverty in Latin America, liberation theologians perceive, is not fatality, or "God's will," but mainly the dark side of the affluence of the rich world, particularly the result of the massive domination of North American capitalism in the area in combination with local groups (see above, p. 111, n. 2).

Gutiérrez argues that the option for the poor in a liberating commitment must take the poor as a global social class. To isolate the poor from the social group to which he belongs leads one only to an inconsequent "feel sorry for him in his situation" ("Faith as Freedom" pp. 32-33).

Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 273. It should be noted that while...
commitment, to be sure, is bound to cause division in the Church and poses a problem for its unity as well as for the universality of Christian love. Yet, though the Church must work for reconciliation, there can be no reconciliation until the walls of class, race, and culture that divide the Latin American society as well as the Church's constituency are destroyed.

The Church is "called to participate actively in constructing a just order." Its function, therefore, cannot be to implore the

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1 Gutierrez does not ignore this danger (A Theology, p. 273). In his view, however, the division already exists within the Church ("South American Theology," pp. 110, 119). Furthermore, while for liberation theologians love is universal, it is not possible to love everyone in the same way: "We love the oppressed by liberating them; we love the oppressors by fighting them. We love the oppressed by liberating them from their misery, and the oppressors by liberating them from their sin . . . [thus] the liberation of the rich and the liberation of the poor are realized at the same time" (Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 122; Gutierrez, A Theology, p. 285, note 56);

2 Gutierrez, "Notes for a Theology of Liberation," ThSt 31 (1970):259. For liberation theologians this just order means an ideal socialist society, which will be in some fragmentary fashion the eschatological kingdom (see below). Segundo leaves no doubt that the Church has to decide in favor of socialism ("Capitalism-Socialism: A Theological Crux" Conc 96 [1974]:105-123). For a

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poor to resign themselves to the exploitation that causes them to suffer so grievously, or merely to advocate moderate reform. Responsive to God's call, the Church must live up to its true vocation in at least three forms, namely, celebration, denunciation, and annunciation.\(^1\) With joy, through the Eucharist, it celebrates God's salvific action of liberation and brotherhood.\(^2\) The Church is also bound to exercise a social critique and prophetic denunciation of every dehumanizing situation. In a more positive way, beyond verbal criticism, it must announce the good news of a new order. This leads to the concept of a politicizing evangelization of the poor.\(^3\)

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\(^1\)See Costas, *The Church and Its Mission*, pp. 237-240 for a helpful discussion of these three dimensions.

\(^2\)Gutiérrez, *A Theology*, pp. 262-265. As Fiorenza summarizes, the three levels of liberation converge in the new understanding of the Eucharist, which transforms the Catholic rite into a celebration of the salvific action of Christ in history, a sign of human brotherhood: "As a meal, it signifies community and brotherhood so that John's Gospel could replace it with the washing of the feet as a symbol of service of one's fellow man. As a Passover meal, it recalls the political liberation of Israel. As a memorial of the death and resurrection of Jesus it commemorates the liberation of man from sin" (Fiorenza, "Latin American Liberation Theology," p. 454).

\(^3\)Gutiérrez underlines that the gospel has "a politicizing function" (*A Theology*, p. 269). This function, he insists, is made real and meaningful only by living and announcing the gospel from within a commitment to liberation, only in concrete, effective solidarity with the exploited social classes. "Only by participating in their struggles can we understand the implications of the gospel message and make it have an impact on history" (ibid.).
Deciding in favor of a given political system, i.e. socialism, the Church must support the revolutionary changes that this new order demands, committing itself to educate the poor regarding the true nature of their own misery, enlisting them in the struggle for justice and liberation.

The Church of the Poor

Liberation theologians not only discuss what the Church is, or why it exists, but also point out where it is to be found. The Church must not merely be for the poor, but above all it must be the Church of the poor.¹ As Gutiérrez contends, to be "faithful to the God of Jesus Christ, it [the Church] has to rethink itself from below, from the position of the poor."²

At this juncture a revolutionary conception of the church began to surface in Latin America, namely, the Iglesia popular, "the People's Church, or the Church that springs from the people."³

¹In the tradition of the document on poverty produced at Medellín, the Latin American bishops at Puebla reaffirmed "the need for conversion on the part of the whole Church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral liberation," (Final Document # T134, emphasis supplied). This language reveals a evident tension: it is not a Church of the poor that is speaking but rather a Church that feels itself to be outside the poor, and hence must opt for them (see F. Berryman, The Religious Roots of Rebellion [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984], pp. 332-333).


³Richard, "Progressive Neo-Conservatism in Latin America," p. 54. During the 1972 National Workshop of the Chilean Christians for Socialism, the Jesuit, Gonzalo Arroyo, one of the leaders of the movement, affirmed: "We look forward to a new Church that will not be under the thumb of the institution . . . Our new Church, which we yearn for and aspire to, is a Church proper to a world already
Justifying the new ecclesiological vision, Gutiérrez remarks that "the gospel read from the point of view of the poor and the exploited, militancy in their struggles for freedom requires a people's Church: a Church which arises from the people, a people who wrest the gospel from the hands of the great ones of this world and thus prevent it being used to justify a situation against the will of the liberating God."  

secularized." "Significado y sentido de Cristianos por el Socialismo," in Cristianos por el Socialismo, ed. Alfredo Fierro and Reyes Mate, (Estella, Navarre: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1975) p. 385. Arroyo went on to say "we must build a Church especially of the poor" (pp. 389-390). At Lima, in February 1973, various movements of priests formed a federation with Gutiérrez as its president. As indicated in a "Summary of the Minutes" of this meeting, the aim was the creation of a "Church of the People," regarded as "the Church of the future," whose purpose is not to be a counter-church, but a church in which the proletariat, the social class oppressed and marginalized, can have its own voice. Contacto (Dec. 1973):75-80. Increasingly the sketch of this new ecclesial option has been gaining clarity and proportions in Latin America. See "Notas de una Iglesia Popular" [Marks of a Church of the People], Liaisons Internationales 4 (Jan-Feb 1975):11-12. The "Final Statement" of the Second National Congress of the National Movement of Christians for Liberation, held at Riobamba, Ecuador, in 1975, recommends "to foster the development of the 'Church of the People' in which the living of the Gospel is intimately linked with concrete historical struggles." See bulletin 18 (May 1975) of the movement, pp. 6-10 cf. Kloppenburg, The People's Church, p. 26. This search for a "Church of the People" finds expression also in the writings of several liberation theologians. See Hugo Assmann, "Iglesia Popular," Contacto (Dec. 1975):22-29; Francisco Vanderhoff and Miguel Angel Campos, "La Iglesia Popular: Condiciones polftico-ideológicas para su surgimiento," Contacto (Dec. 1975):35-44. Raúl Viales, "Evangelización y liberación popular" in Liberación y cautivo, pp. 221-226; Gutiérrez, "Revelación y anuncio de Dios en la historia" Pastoral Popular 146 (Oct.-Dec. 1976):41-42. While for Dussel the Iglesia Popular "is not a different church or a new church," but "simply a new model of the age-old Church" (Current Events in Latin America," p. 79), the conservative Franciscan Bonaventure Kloppenburg regards it as "new sect" (The People's Church, pp. 75-78).

1Gutiérrez, "The Poor in the Church," p. 15; The Power of
Convinced that it is not enough to be for the poor, a notion that, from the perspective of liberation theology, connotes paternalistic and developmentalist ideas, liberation theologians underline that real, effective striving to eliminate poverty must be linked with the poverty perspective, i.e., the perspective of those within the movement of the poor for liberation. To really incarnate and give content to its option for the poor, the Church must convert itself to another world, i.e., the world of the exploited and oppressed and become a Church of the poor.

While the concept of the Church for the poor is understood as an ethical question, the vision of the Church of the poor is theologically justified on Christological/ontological grounds. If, as Gutiérrez insists, "a Christian understanding of the church begins..."^1 the Poor, p. 21. In his controversial Igreja, Carisma e Poder (Petropolis, Brazil: Editora Vozes, 1982), Leonardo Boff, after an overview of traditional Latin American ecclesiological models "inherited from the past," arrives at the emergence of the new model: "the Church arising from the poor" (pp. 15-28). According to him, "from the time of Theodosius the Church was a Church for the poor, but it never managed to be a Church of the poor" (p. 27). This is precisely what is taking place in Latin America today.

^1 Jon Sobrino, The True Church of the Poor (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1984), p. 92. It should be noted that although Vatican II insisted that the Church should imitate Jesus in his identification with the poor (Lumen Gentium, art. 8), as Míguez Bonino remarks, in ecclesiological terms the poor are not recognized as a constitutive element of the mystery of the Church ("Ecclesia Pauper," p. 139). Furthermore, the poverty which the church is called to assume is more a matter of external forms (see above p. 89, n. 2; cf. Congar, Power and Poverty in the Church, pp. 80ff), than real identification with the socioeconomically poor and oppressed (Míguez Bonino, Ecclesia Pauper, p. 139).
with christology,"\(^1\) the Church finds its true identity when it conforms to Jesus Christ, when it assumes his "spiritual structure, his way of being."\(^2\) The Church, therefore, must be present where Christ promised to be present. It must follow Jesus where he already preceded it, or in the famous ecclesiological formula of Ignatius of Antioch, *ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia.*\(^3\)

The church, liberation theologians contend, received from Jesus a paradigmatic image, drawn from his ministry to the poor, his solidarity with them, his compassion for the multitudes, and his attacks on the mighty—as well as his condemnation and execution by them. All this, as Sobrino argues in his *The True Church and the Poor,* makes the place where the poor stand normative for what the true church is and is to be.\(^4\) Hence the church must live a concrete life of identification with the poor and minister to their needs. Since Jesus identified with them, the poor are not merely recipients


\(^3\)Ignatius, "Epistle to the Smyrnaens," ANF 1:174

\(^4\)Sobrino, *The True Church,* pp. 84-124. In a fashion which recalls Bonhoeffer's way of thinking about Christ as a structure, a spatial reality taking place in the world (see, *The Cost of Discipleship* [New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1961], pp. 337-344), Sobrino sees a correlation between the resurrection of Christ and the rise of the Church of the poor. Where resurrection is urgently needed—as in the Latin American condition of death and wretchedness—he remarks, there Christ is especially present. The plight of oppressed in need of "resurrection," according to Sobrino's complex theological elaboration, gives to the "church of the poor" the true ecclesial status.
of Christian charity, or an external entity to which the church must be related in one way or another. They belong to the understanding of the very nature of the church and become an ecclesiological criterion, a test of authenticity.\(^1\) In Míguez Bonino's words, "the

\(^1\)Míguez Bonino asks, "If the church is where Christ is, do not the poor become constitutive of the mystery of the church?" (Doing Theology, p. 158). When liberation theologians defend Jesus' unity with the poor, the primary reference is to the poor in general, outside the Church. Traditional theology has identified the church exclusively with promises of Christ's presence in the believing community, the ecclesia. Departing from this standard notion, liberation theology, based on a particular interpretation of the parable of the final judgment which concludes Matthew's eschatological discourse (Mt 25:31-46), places emphasis on the presence of Jesus outside the community of faith, "in the least brethren" (v. 40), identified as the poor, "whoever they may be" (Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 197-198; The Power of the Poor, pp. 95-95; "The Irruption of the Poor," pp. 117-123; Sobrino, The True Church, p. 100; Segundo, The Community Called Church, pp. 9-11). While Gutiérrez suggests that the poor outside the Church form another ecclesial community, the theme finds itself more fully elaborated in the work of the French Dominican Benoît A. Dumas. Dumas, who spent many years in Paraguay, in his book, Los dos rostros de la Iglesia una (Buenos Aires: Latinoamérica Libros, 1971), written from the perspective of liberation theology, argues that if the identity of the church is found in Christ, ubi Christus ibi ecclesia, then one must pay attention to the fact that Christ promised to be present in two areas: first, in the believing community (cf. Matt 10: 40-43; Mark 9:41; Luke 10:16; John 13:20); second: outside the ecclesia, among the "least brethren" (pp. 82-103; cf. Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, pp. 159-164; idem, "The Struggle of the Poor and the Church," ECR 27 (1975):40-41; Santa Ana, Good News to the Poor, pp. 20-21; Kirk, Liberation Theology, pp. 134-135). The main thesis of Dumas' book is that Christ's presence among the poor and oppressed transforms them into a "second brotherhood" outside the believing community. Jesus, therefore, has two faces: one in the community of faith, the "brotherhood of believers," and the other among the suffering poor, who are the "latent brotherhood." The whole doctrine of the church must be developed between these two poles which question each other. These two faces, we are told, became separate as the community of faith was transformed predominantly into the church of the rich, leading the Church to no longer recognize itself in the poor, and the poor to no longer recognize Christ in the Church (pp. 16-39). Thus, for Dumas, the church is not entirely within the Church, as long as the poor who await their liberation do not know Jesus Christ and do
church which is not the church of the poor puts in serious jeopardy its churchly character.¹ The Church's identification with the poor, therefore, is not a matter of preference, but a choice that derives from its constitutive essence. "To say 'church of the poor' is almost a redundancy," contends the Chilean theologian Pablo Richard. "The church is either of the poor or it is not the church."² In this new model of existence, the Church "does not conceive the poor as 'part'

not recognize him in his visible Body committed together with them (p. 20; cf. Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, pp. 160-161). It should be noted that Dumas' conception is identical to Jurgen Moltmann's ecclesiological interpretation of Matt 25:31-40 in almost every detail. See Moltmann's The Church in the Power of the Spirit (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 121-132. However, despite the confluent aspects between Moltmann's and liberation theologians' interpretation of Matt 25, there is a fundamental difference: while Moltmann contends that the church must seek its true identity in identifying with the poor, he does not see the poor through the lens of social analysis. Míguez Bonino, thus, rebukes him for not giving concrete content to the "identification with the oppressed" (Doing Theology, p. 147). Moltmann's declaration that "the crucified God is really a God without country, without class" and at the same time "the God of the Poor" (The Crucified God, p. 305) is seen by Míguez Bonino as a contradiction, since the poor, the oppressed, the humiliated, are a class and live in countries . . . Are we really for the poor and oppressed," Bonino asks, "if we fail to see them as a class, as members of the oppressed societies?" (Doing Theology, p. 148; cf. Assmann, Practical Theology of Liberation, p. 94).


²Richard. "The Latin American Church," p. 36. Assuming that Jesus does not have an identity separate or separable from his identification with the poor (Míguez Bonino, "Fundamental Questions" p. 148; also Ignacio Ellacuría, "La Iglesia de los pobres," p. 717), liberation theology comes to the inevitable conclusion that apart from the poor the Church is in fact separate from Christ, without legitimate identity. Pablo Richard argues that "every economic or political or ideological alliance that the Church forges with the dominant classes represents a denial of the church's true identity.
of itself, even a 'privileged part,' but thinks of them rather as the center of the whole,"¹ the principle of the Church's structure, organization, and mission.

As a result of its strong conviction that the poor are the authentic theological source for the understanding of the constitution of the church, liberation theology has been led to a radical revision of two central developments of Vatican Council II. First, the notion of the Church as the sacrament of salvation of mankind and, second, the concept of the Church as the People of God. On the one hand, if the Council conceived of the church as the true sign and manifestation of the salvific plan of God's action in history, liberation theologians concluded that in Latin America, the poor and their struggle for liberation disclose the meaning of the Church. The struggling poor are the true sacrament of God's historical saving activity,² recalling the confessing community to

Because of its very essence which is liberating and salvific, the Church can be built up only from the underside of history, from the side of the poor and oppressed" (ibid; cf. Santa Ana Towards a Church of the Poor, p. 163).


²See Ronaldo Muñoz, "Ecclesiology in Latin America," p. 153. By the time of Vatican Council II, those interested in conciliar pronouncement in favor of the "church of the poor," such as the French theologian Paul Gauthier and Cardinal Lercaro, discussed Jesus' triplusc present in the church. Besides the classical notion of Jesus's Eucharistic presence in the bread, and his mystic presence in the institutional-hierarchic Church, they spoke of a third presence: Jesus' social presence in the poor. Given Christ's identification with the poor, the latter becomes a sign of the Lord's special presence alongside the two sacramental presences (see P. Gauthier, Christ, the Church and the Poor [Westminster: Newman Press,
its true meaning and destiny, since it is only through their liberation that the Church will become the one and true Church.\footnote{1}

On the other hand, the Council applied to the Church the concept of People of God—an image taken from the Old Testament which uses it in close association with the Exodus paradigm as a designation of Israel in its special relationship to Yahweh—to indicate the Church's election, vocation, historicity and mission.\footnote{2}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{1}{1965], pp. 62-65; Miguez Bonino, "Ecclesia Pauper," p. 135). This reflection was passed over in silence by the official documents of the Council. See Walbert Bühlmann, "Kirche der Armen," in Fastenopfer der Schweitzer Katholiken, Arbeitsmappe Kirche (Lucerne: 1971), p. 5-8; Le Guillou et al., Mission et pauvreté (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1963). The reference of Vatican II to "pauperes" and "paupertas" carefully avoided any sacramental language defining Jesus' unity with the poor (Miguez Bonino, "Ecclesia Pauper," p. 139-141). After Medellín, liberation theologians took on the ecclesiological theme of the sacramental unity of Christ with the poor. But departing from Gauthier and Lercaro, they insist that the concept of "poor" is not perceived subjectively through charity nor theologically in the conception of the "suffering Christ," but, through the use of socioeconomic analysis, as a class, oppressed and exploited people. This perception led to emphasis on the conflictive dialectic involved in the concept of poverty, which revolves around the axis poor/rich, oppressed/oppressor. Thus, to opt for the poor, as we have indicated earlier, is to assume their striving for liberation in class struggle sense. This vision in turn led to a perception of the same conflictive dialectic within the visible Church which is polarized into two opposites (ibid., pp. 12-39).

\footnote{2}{See Lumen Gentium, chap. 2, Abbott, pp. 24-37; cf. Congar, "The Church: The People of God," and Jacques Dupont, "The Church as the People of God," both in The Church and Mankind, pp. 11-37; and 117-129.}
\end{footnotes}
Liberation theologians, however, shifted radically the Council's "abstract" and "universalist" understanding of the concept. In liberation theology the term has taken on a specific political connotation. The "People of God" are identified with the biblical anawim, the Poor of Yahweh, whose poverty in the polarized Latin American situation, as mediated through class analysis, is seen exclusively in terms of economic deprivation and political oppression, and who are transformed into a moral proletariat.

The very notion of "people" in liberation theologians' writings connotes leftist political sympathies. It generally occurs as a synonym for "the poor" which in turn means the "oppressed" class in a Marxist sense. As Pablo Richard remarks, liberation theology

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1 Sobrino, *The True Church*, pp. 92-93.
3 Pablo Richard criticizes the preliminary document of CELAM's Puebla Conference for using the term "people" "as if it referred to an all inclusive social and political entity beyond class differences and contradictions" ("The Latin American Church," p. 44). Richard's point is that the failure to recognize the concrete meaning of the "People of God" is willingly to support the ideology of the status quo. "The people" becomes an all-inclusive term that mythicizes the reality of class conflict, in a manner similar to "the nation" (cf. McCann, pp. 214-215). This is precisely what Vidales seeks to avoid: "When we speak of a 'Church of the People' we must be careful to make it clear that we are not giving the phrase universalist meaning . . . For us, the term 'people' is historically connected with the exploited sectors within dependent capitalist system such as the one we are now the victims of in Latin America. The 'people,' then consists of those groups whose common interests are opposed to the interests of the dominant class . . . the term presupposes a knowledge of who are the exploiters and who the exploited," ("Evangelización y liberacion popular," *Liberacion y Cautiverio*, p. 233).

4 See Kloppenburg, *The People's Church*, pp. 35-42. Understanding the church as the "People of God," therefore becomes a warrant

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has replaced "the somewhat romantic" word poor by exploited, giving to the concept a precise meaning. When Assmann, for example, speaks of the "epistemological privilege of the poor," he qualifies the use of the term by adding: "The privileged poor of the gospel are the struggling poor, struggling within a holistic perspective of revolution." According to him, the privileged hearers of the summons of God are not any poor but the conscientized poor, those with "at least a beginning of class consciousness." They alone are "privileged witnesses to the Gospel which they have understood and made their own, who struggle for their own liberation and who"

for identifying the Church with the oppressed, a development which not only provides another example of liberation political hermeneutics of the gospel (McCann, Christian Realism, p. 214), but also reflects a movement toward what Kloppenburg calls "the Marxist reinterpretation of ecclesiology" (The People's Church, p. 36).

1 P. Richard, Cristianos por el Socialismo: Historia y Documentos (Salamanca: Ediciones Sigüíme, 1979), p. 16; see above.


3 Ibid. The poor who have a clear understanding of the faith and of the world—a truer interpretation of what faith means and what the world is really like, as Gutiérrez says (A Theology, pp. 83-85; also "Freedom and Salvation" p. 75)—are the poor engaged in the struggle for liberation. Summarizing the thought of liberation theologians regarding the "poverty perspective, Gudorf says, "only the poor within the struggle can see what need to be struggled against, and what faith really means clearly enough to give shape to real liberation" (Catholic Social Teachings, p. 61; cf. McAfee Brown, Theology in a New Key, p. 61).

4 The concept of conscientization is discussed below.

endeavor to break their own chains."¹ L. Boff concurs with this understanding, stressing that the poor are not merely those who have needs. To be sure, they do have them, but the poor are specifically those with proletarian consciousness, i.e., the consciousness of being oppressed, which gives them "historical power, capacity to change and evangelizing potential."² The "Church of the Poor," or the "Church of the People," thus is particularly built and constituted by those whose consciousness have been raised to enter into the process of liberation with a revolutionary horizon, clearly grasped and accepted.

Basic Ecclesial Communities:
The Irruption of the Poor

In a celebrated statement of Lumen Gentium, Vatican II called the Church "to enter upon the path of poverty,"³ a theme taken up with increased precision at Medellín, where the Latin American bishops went so far as to outline the role of "a poor church."⁴ Following in these steps, liberation theology pushed the notion still further. In Gutiérrez' view, what is ultimately important is not so

¹Assmann, "Iglesia Popular," p. 29.


³See Lumen Gentium, no 8.

⁴The Church in the Present-Day Transformation, pp. 172-179.
much "making the Church poor, as seeing to it that the poor of the world become the church." \(^1\)

In Latin America this vision actualizes itself through the Basic Ecclesial Communities, \(^2\) which according to Comblin "are the place where the people of the poor are transformed into the people of God." \(^3\) Considered the major event in the present structures of the

\(^1\) Gutiérrez, The Power of the Poor, p. 211; cf. McAfee Brown, Gustavo Gutiérrez, p. 41.

\(^2\) The Base Communities, which are referred to either as Ecclesial (BEC) or Christian (BCC), constitute a dynamic movement that defies easy definition. It represents, above all, a convergence of different trends in Catholic ecclesial development which were already at work in the years preceding Vatican II. The experience of the BECs as a widespread Catholic phenomenon appeared in Latin America, especially in Brazil, Chile and Panama, in the late 1950s (See José Marins, "Basic Christian Communities in Latin America," LADOCC 7 [1976]:2), originally as an answer to the inadequacy of the Church's presence in some supposedly Catholic areas (Jane E. Russell, Renewing the Gospel Community: Four Catholic Movements with an Anabaptist Parallel [Ph.D. dissertation, Notre Dame University, 1979], p. 294). This pastoral concern, however, converged with an important stream: the grassroots education movement--"Movimento de Educação de Base" (MEB)--started in Northeastern Brazil out of the increasing awareness of the appalling plight of the poor. The MEB's objective was to raise the poverty-stricken masses to a minimum of awareness and of literacy so that they would begin to help themselves (Marins, "Basic Christian Communities," p. 4). The basic technique used by the MEB was Paulo Freire's pedagogical method called conscientização (consciousness raising), a process whereby people were made aware of the social and political realities which surrounded them. Later refined it became the methodology of the Base Ecclesial Communities (Bruneau, The Political Transformation, pp. 30-104; Emanuel de Kadt, Catholic Radicals in Brazil [London: Oxford University Press, 1970], pp. 34-105).

\(^3\) Comblin, "The Church in Latin America," p. 8. At an accelerated pace literature dealing with the Basic Communities has been growing increasingly in the last fifteen years. For an extended discussion of the subject, see Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, eds., The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities; Athyl William Cook, The Expectation of the Poor: A Protestant Missiological Study of the Catholic "Comunidades de Base" in Brazil (Ph.D. dissertation: Fuller
Latin American Catholic Church,¹ the BECs are in Gutiérrez' thought an "irruption of the poor," the "absent ones"² making their presence felt in the historical process of Latin America and in the life of the Catholic Church in the continent. As an effective way to bring the ecclesia into close contact with the masses of the common people


the BECs are in fact giving rise to a new model of the Church: a Church springing from below. In the words of L. Boff, "a real ecclesiogenesis" has been taking place at the base level, as a corrective of traditional molitic and vertical ecclesial structures.

The Basic Ecclesial Communities are small groups of some ten to thirty members, within the parish area, stressing the active participation of all in worship, reflection and action. They create strong interpersonal bonds through a process of cooperation, and sharing. Described by the Medellin Conference as "the first and fundamental ecclesiastical nucleus . . . the initial cell of the

1Leonardo Boff, "Theological Characteristics of a Grassroots Church," in The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities, p. 133. Boff argues that, by reproducing the dissymmetrical structure of the capitalist society, the Church ended up creating its own ecclesiastical block and "became the property of one class," i.e., the rich and powerful (p. 136). Breaking the traditional ties, through the BECs the Church is now recapturing "the original import of Christianity," i.e. the priority of the poor (pp. 133-134; also idem, Igreja Carisma e Poder, pp. 23-28).

2From the perspective of liberation theology, the word "base" or "base level" means the poor, oppressed, believing people. Gutierrez warns against the possibility of a mistaken intraecclesiastical understanding of the term, i.e., "base" in relation to the "apex" of the Church pyramid ("The Irruption of the Poor," p. 116).

3Many see this type of grass-roots church formation as supported by Vatican II; and Pope Paul VI's Evangelii nuntiandi (see Kerkofs, "Basic Communities in the Church," pp. 4-6). It received definite approval from Latin American Bishops at Medellin and later final confirmation at Puebla. In the decade separating the two conferences, the BECs swelled from an estimated 100,000 to 150,000, most of them in Brazil; but constantly spreading throughout the continent, they are today found in all Latin American nations (see "The Church of the Poor," Time, May 7, 1979, p. 88). The BECs, however, do not exist without opposition. (See Enrique Dussel and Felipe Espinosa, "Puebla: Crónica y historia," Christus 44 (March-April, 1979):26; Enrique Garcia Ahumada, "Catechesis in Latin America: A General Assessment," LumVit 39 (1984):219.)
ecclesiastical structures and the focus of evangelization . . . the most important source of human advancement and development, the BECs flourish among the people coming from the poorest strata of society. One finds them in rural areas and peripheral poor neighborhood in the large cities. The Puebla Conference interpreted them as "an expression of the Church's preferential love for the poor.

The Church in the Present-Day Transformation, p. 185. Facing an acute scarcity of priests in a continent of millions of baptized but hardly evangelized Catholics, and realizing the inadequacy of traditional structures to relate to the lower classes increasingly indifferent to the Church, many Catholic leaders came to the conclusion that the basic pastoral unit of the whole system—the parish—was no longer a viable incarnation of the local church (see Bruneau, "Basic Christian Communities in Latin America," pp. 225-227; Guimaraes, Comunidades de Base no Brasil, pp. 118-131; Sobrino, The True Church, pp. 112-113). As an alternative for the local expression of the universal Church, the BECs, however, have introduced inevitable elements of tension with fundamental ecclesiological implications, as indicated below:

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<tr>
<th>The Parish</th>
<th>The BEC</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Structure</td>
<td>hierarchical</td>
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<td>2. Doctrine</td>
<td>fundamental</td>
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<tr>
<td>Run by</td>
<td>clerics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emphasis laid on</td>
<td>religious practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social origin</td>
<td>-middle class and upper</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sacraments</td>
<td>-instruments of salvation</td>
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<td>Religious values</td>
<td>-for individual life</td>
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<tr>
<td>Center of the Church</td>
<td>-Rome-</td>
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</table>

centers of evangelization and moving forces of liberation."¹

Arising largely in response to Latin American social and ecclesial context, the BECs do not often follow a uniform pattern, but they offer a broad spectrum of characteristics. The image of the Church that emerges from them, however, presents two basic dimensions: one intraecclesial, with strong emphasis on ecclesial renovation,² best expressed by the idea of community.³ The second is a secular dimension with emphasis on political action toward liberation, a characteristic usually expressed by the notion of militancy.⁴ If sometimes the impression is given that liberation theologians place a one-sided emphasis on the extra-ecclesial/

¹"Final Document," in Puebla and Beyond, # 643 and 96.

²This trend includes: deemphasis of the sacraments; active lay leadership; concern that the Church be a real, experiential community; formation of the Church "from ground up"; rediscovery of the Scriptures, etc. (Russel, pp. 311-320). In this line of thought the "Final Document" of Puebla emphasizes that the BECs provide more personalized interrelations (# 629) and evangelization (# 111); lead to better understanding of the Word of God (# 640) and of the gospel (# 173); foster commitment to Christian love (# 641); encourage the emergence of new types of lay ministries (# 97, 629); provide an effective style of catechesis for the common people (# 629).

³See Cook, The Expectation of the Poor, pp. 185-187.

⁴Clodovis Boff, "The Nature of Basic Christian Communities," in Tensions between the Churches, pp. 57-58; Cook, "Base Ecclesial Community," pp. 191-196. H. Assmann even suggests that the BECs will provide "infra-structural" support for guerrilla warfare (see Practical Theology of Liberation [London: Search Press, 1975], p. 137). At Puebla the bishops realized the threat of the "instrumentalization" of the BECs by Marxists or by Marxist ideas (see Hennely, "The Grassroots Church," pp. 183-184). Thus while Puebla hailed the Christians Communities as a means to "promote reflection of the social reality" (see the "Final Document," # 629) and foster "greater commitment to justice within the social milieu" (# 641), it also voiced clear warnings against present dangers (see # 98; 261-263).
secular function of the BECs,¹ the charge of "political reductionism" would be an oversimplification of a complex issue. While Gutiérrez insists that the first point of reference of the BECs lies outside ecclesial boundaries and is to be found in the world of the poor and their struggle for liberation,² there is no deemphasis on faith or religious life, since these elements must be incorporated into the liberative process. Here is precisely where lies the revolutionary character of the BECs: they form a meeting ground for the dialectical relationship of the political and religious dimensions of the oppressed and believing people,³ who, according to Gutiérrez, are "one and the same people."⁴

¹See Deelen, "The Church on its way to the People," p. 387.
²"The Irruption of the Poor," p. 116.
³Gutiérrez, 112-119. In this context under the sub-heading "Who or What Are 'the Poor?'" Gutiérrez underlines that the term "poor" has a "collective connotation and entails an element of social conflict" ("The Irruption of the Poor," 112). For him "the isolated poor does not exist" (p. 111; idem, "Two Theological Perspectives," p. 247). The poor are the oppressed class, the proletariat, "those who are deprived from the fruit of their labor (p. 112), and it is in these terms that they must be organized. Inseparably linked with this dimension is the character of the people as "believing Christians" (pp. 113-114). When liberation theologians refer to the poor as "believing Christians," they speaking in general terms (in the same sense in which Latin America is a "Christian continent"). The "believing people" are the majority of Latin American poor, who express their religiosity through popular, folk Catholicism, mixed with syncretic elements borrowed from indigenous and Afroamerican cultures (see Cook, "Basic Ecclesial Community," p. 114). Liberation theologians discern in this popular religiosity strong liberative elements which must be incorporated into the process of liberation (Bonino, "Popu'rr Piety," p. 154; Aldo Bütting, "Dimensions of Popular Catholicism in the Process of Liberation," RadRel 3 [1978]:37).
Defined as the "theology of liberation put into practice,"¹ the BECs retain the basic Unitarian vision of the new Latin American theology. They provide the practical arena where liberation methodology is expressed. Since "the possibility of liberative faith are bound up with their [the poor's] revolutionary capacity and vice versa,"² the stress falls on the dialectical character of the word-action interrelationship. The revolutionary potential of the poor/believer must be organized and developed. It is "in the service of such development," Gutiérrez says, "that we are seeing the rise of the Christian communities of the people and the people's Church, rooted in the poor."³

Following the basic insight of the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire--according to whom the unjust system has distorted the exploited classes to such a degree that they not only are blind about their true situation but also have internalized the oppressor's

¹This is the definition of the Brazilian Bishop, Waldir Calheiros de Novais, a supporter of liberation theology (cf. "The Church of the Poor," Time, May 7, 1979, p. 88). Beal also notes the mutual correspondence and teaching experience between liberation theology and the BECs ("Latin America: A New Beginning," pp. 186-200; cf. Hannelly, "The Grassroots Church," p. 187). The conservative camp, however, sees the BECs exclusively as an instrument of ecclesial renewal (Alfonso L. Trujilo, "Basic Ecclesial Communities and Evangelization in Latin America," WMission 29 [1978]:4-12).

²Gutiérrez, ibid., p. 114.

³Ibid., p. 114. For Gutiérrez the BECs are "evangelizing cadres" made of persons who assume a function with the evangelization process (p. 118). "Evangelization" however, is not limited to the proclamation of the word. It means also "the commitment to the poor and oppressed . . . in their lives and their struggles" (ibid). From Gutiérrez' discussion of the function of the BECs, it is clear that the process of conscientization their primary mission (p. 115).
perspective and the low opinion they [the oppressors] have of them—liberation theologians insist that the poor "being scarcely aware that they are men," need to experience at the psychological level an

1Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 46. Beginning with the experience of his literacy programs on behalf of the impoverished peasants of Northeastern Brazil, Freire elaborated an analysis of the "psychology of oppression," found in this book, originally published in Portuguese in 1968. According to Freire, the poor have been so thoroughly brainwashed by the oppressors that they do not realize their human condition, their fundamental right to share in the goods of the earth, and their possibility to gain control of their own destinies. They are turned into "yes people," who have no self-esteem nor opinion of themselves (p. 49), accepting their situation of oppression fatalistically and passively (p. 48). Freire developed the notion of conscientização, or "awakening of conscience," a process in which the oppressed are led, through interpersonal dialogue, not only to discover the meaning of their own humanity, worth, and place in nature and society, but also to develop the capacity of critically perceiving social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality (p. 19). See Paulo Freire, "Education as Cultural Action," in Luis Collonese ed. Conscientization for Liberation (Arlington: Goodway Printing, 1971), pp. 109-122. For a concise treatment of Freire's main ideas, see Bennie E. Goodwin, "Education as Liberation: An Analysis of Paulo Freire," JIntThC 2 (1975):88-99. For a deeper analysis of Freire's thought and its implications for theological method, see McCann, pp. 164-175.

2Gutiérrez, "Liberation, Theology and Proclamation," pp. 57-59. The assumption that the poor and exploited classes are "scarcely aware that they are men" has become the target of severe criticism from sociologist Peter L. Berger (Pyramids of Sacrifice [New York: Basic Books, 1974], pp. 111-118). According to Berger it involves a philosophical error (i.e., it assumes a hierarchical view of consciousness, in which the masses, not understanding their own situation, must be enlightened by selected higher-class individuals who presume "to know the truth") and a political irony (i.e., those who embrace the method usually see themselves as genuine democrats, close to "the masses" and emphatically "antielitist"). For Berger, no one is "more conscious" than anyone else: different individuals are conscious of different things, and the poor person knows his world better than any outsider ever can. For a summary of Berger criticism, see "The False Consciousness of 'Consciousness Raising'," in Mission Trends, No. 4, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 96-110.
"interior liberation," which is a cognitive pre-condition for any effective liberation. This must be accomplished through the process of conscientization. Confirming this point, Míguez Bonino writes:

The mobilization for "a popular uprising" and the takeover of power requires a serious and extended work of politicization of the masses, helping them to become aware of the contradiction of the system under which they suffer.

At Medellín the bishops had spoken favorably of a program of religious and social conscientization, though one may wonder if they really grasped the implications of what they were subscribing to. Seizing upon the bishops' statements, but going beyond them,

1 Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, p. 91.

2 For liberation theologians conscientization is an indispensable pre-condition for revolutionary action. Severino Croatto remarks that "there is no liberation process without a previous stage of conscientization of the oppressed, the sole architect of his liberation," Liberación y libertad (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Mundo Nuevo, 1973), p. 84. Through it, the oppressed person rejects the oppressive consciousness which dwells in him, becomes aware of his situation, and finds his new language. He becomes, by himself, less dependent and freer, as he commits himself to the transformation and building up of society" (Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 91). Since the process of conscientization "is an awakening of the critical consciousness which produces an experience of social discontent" (John G. David, Christians, Politics and Violent Revolution [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976], p. 101), as Berger notes, it is "the cognitive preparation for revolutionary action" (Pyramids of Sacrifice, p. 112).

3 Doing Theology, p. 141.

4 Medellín refers to conscientization as something addressed both to "oppressed sectors" (The Church in the Present-day Transformation, pp. 47-48) and to "key men ... to those at a decision-making level" (p. 41). The evident contradiction is that this approach ignores Freire's vision of a world divided between oppressors and oppressed.
liberation theologians proposed a "conscientizing evangelization,"¹ a concept, which, to a great extent provides the rationale for the basic communities.² Through this enlightenment the BECs trigger the process which will enable the poor to enter the historical process as responsible subjects capable of forging a truly egalitarian, fraternal and just society which is the precondition for the emergence of a new man.³

¹Gutiérrrez, A Theology p. 116. Elsewhere Gutiérrrez clarifies that "evangelization" must convey a political dimension, which gives authenticity to the proclamation of the gospel ("The Irruption of the Poor," p. 118), otherwise it will be a "pseudo-evangelization" (Alvaro Barreiro, Basic Ecclesial Communities, p. 31).

²McCann, Christian Realism, p. 170. A long article run by a well known Brazilian newspaper on the BECs noted that "accused of being Communists or subversives, the Basic Communities have as one of their principal functions the development of a political consciousness and the awakening of the people to become aware of their rights. This unleashes a process of critical reflection on the reality of local problems and the causes of this reality" ("Comunidades Eclesiais de Base," Jornal do Brasil [May 14, 1978], p. 6). See A. Lorscheider, Basic Ecclesiastical Communities in Latin America," p. 144. For many, the BECs are "schools for those who will forge history" (Berryman, The Religious Roots of Rebellion, p. 334).

³Gutiérrrez insists that the ultimate goal "beyond—or rather through the struggle against misery, injustice, and exploitation . . . is the creation of a new man" (A Theology of Liberation, p. 158; cf. pp. 91, 111). Since the present structure of capitalist society, resting on the assumption that men are not fundamentally equal, is the root cause in keeping the poor deprived of his human dignity, it is only when this structure is broken that the new man will emerge. For Gutiérrrez the advent of the "new man" will be possible only within a socialist system (ibid., p. 127). He reacts against the notion that it is useless to change structures if man's heart is not changed. "It is only a half truth," he argues, "because it disregards the fact that man's 'heart' is also transformed by changing the social and cultural structures" (The Praxis of Liberation," p. 382; Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 40). Gutiérrrez does not maintain that the creation of a new society, freer and more human, will automatically make man less selfish, but insists that in such a society "it will be more possible to work realistically toward
As in Freire's pedagogy, the BECs will help the poor to move from naivety to an increasingly critical analysis of the structures that constitute and legitimate oppression, including traditional Christianity. This "rising consciousness" in the context of the BECs, however, moves beyond Freire's methodology which—as a restatement of Marx's critique of religion, could not see religion as a liberative force. Contrary to Marxist conclusions that religion is only an alienating influence wholly at the service of the dominant classes, keeping the oppressed ignorant of their true reality and giving them false consolation for their present sufferings, liberation theologians are determined to refute such criticism by engaging Scripture and Christian symbols as liberating forces in the proletariat's struggle.

human solidarity than it is in a society torn asunder by iniquity" (A Theology, p. 112). Not surprisingly, socialism seems to be understood as the only alternative for Christians in Latin America (see p. 48, 110-111). Hans Küng, however, has criticized liberation theologians on this point, observing that although "a Christian can be a socialist...[he] is not bound to be a socialist" (On Being a Christian, p. 567).

McCann, Christian Realism, p. 170. McCann poses a strong criticism to liberation's appropriation of Freire's concept of conscientization. Freire's theory, which is a secular ideology that reduces all reality to history and permits no genuine religious transcendence, is hardly compatible with Christian evangelization. Hence liberation theology seems doomed from the outset by too closely identifying itself with a particular ideology of social change and by leaning too heavily on a secular view of history (see McCann, pp. 164-172).

Gutiérrez points out that in the BECs, "the private owners of the goods of this world cease to be the owners of the gospel" (Faith as Freedom, p. 58). These "rebellious communities," he goes on, are communities in which the dispossessed can realize a social appropriation of the gospel (ibid.). The religious factor—
Consistent with the movement's frame of reference, liberation theology's conscientizing evangelization reinforces the faith of the BECs that the liberating God of the Bible is especially concerned with them and their struggles. To overcome the fatalist and passive attitudes ingrained in their minds, considerable attributes are assigned to the poor. To them it is told that they must not resign themselves to their lot, for God is on their side, an affirmation which becomes a distinctive methodological principle validated by liberationist use of the Exodus story and other biblical narratives. The poor, it is contended, are the true "People of God," the privileged, if not exclusive, locus of God's revelation. Not traditionally has been used by the oppressor to justify the existing social order must be converted into a weapon for liberation (see Gutiérrez, "The Irruption of the Poor," p. 113-115).


2 The affirmation that God is on the side of the poor is an underlying assumption of liberation theology (Gutiérrez, "Two Theological Perspectives," p. 247; McAfee Brown, Theology in a New Key, p. 61; Barreiro, Basic Ecclesial Communities, p. 24). Mainly under the influence of liberation theology, the conviction of God's bias toward the poor has emerged in theological and biblical studies with such impetus that, as Sam A. Portaro notes, it seems to be "turning up everywhere as a new rallying cry for social justice" ("Is God Prejudiced in Favor of the poor," ChrCent 102 [1985]:40).

3 L. Boff, "Theological Characteristics," p. 134; see below. According to Sobrino "the Spirit is present in the poor ex opere operato" (The True Church, p. 95). It means that "the Spirit manifests himself in the poor and that they are therefore structural channels for finding the truth of the Church and the direction and content of its mission" (ibid.). Hardly surprising for Sobrino, the poor are the a "new Magisterium" of the Church (ibid).

4 Gutiérrez, "South American Theology," p. 116; Miranda, Marx and the Bible, p. 48; see above.
only are they the special addressees of the gospel message,⁠¹ they also are its bearers,⁠² those "who evangelize and build up the Church."⁠³ For being poor, they are "righteous," and the subject carriers of the kingdom.⁠⁴ In the BECs, Berryman remarks in a recent article, the poor hear the biblical text: "Blest are you poor; the reign of God is yours. Blest are you who hunger; you shall be filled. Blest are you who are weeping; you shall laugh" applied in a very radical this-worldly sense.⁵

¹Gutiérrez, "The Irruption of the Poor," p. 120; Gutiérrez not only argues that Jesus' message "entailed an inescapable preference for the poor" (p. 117), but also that his teachings move "from the poor to the poor" (p. 121). Consequently, "there is a transcendental correlation between the Good News and the poor" (Sobrino, The True Church, pp. 120-121); E. Gethi, Rich Church--Poor Church (New York: Orbis Books, 1974), p. 43. Julio de Santa Ana states that the poor are the true "evangelists who bear Christ, Christophoros" (Towards a Church of the Poor, 164).

²Pablo Richard, "The Latin American Church," p. 42; Sobrino, The True Church, p. 121; Gutiérrez, "The Irruption," p. 121.

³Gutiérrez, ibid., p. 12.

⁴See below, p. 203, According to E. Dussel, "only he who opts for the poor can be saved." "An International Division of labor," Foundations, 24 (1980):385. This option, it must be kept in mind, is expressed in class struggle (Gutiérrez, "The Praxis of Liberation," p. 382; see the article "¿Qué Queda de la Opción por los Pobres?" in La Iglesia de los pobres en América Central, ed. P. Richard and G. Meléndez [San José: DEI, 1982], pp. 127-133). Involvement in the struggles of the poor thus seems to become the very norm of access to the kingdom. Liberation theologians affirm a universalistic view of salvation, i.e., it is for all, believers and nonbelievers alike. There is no doubt that God will grant salvation to Marxists, since liberating the oppressed they are really doing God's work. However, there seems to be some doubt that all Christians will be saved, since their majority are not measuring up to the standard of divine judgment, i.e. "our capacity to create brotherly conditions of life" (Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 198-99; Vree, "Christian Marxists" p. 42).

⁵Philip Berryman, "Basic Christian Communities and the Future
Identified with the poor of the Gospels, the oppressed class, the proletariat, automatically becomes the heir of the kingdom of God,¹ which in turn to some extent, is identified with the revolutionary struggle. Not surprisingly, Gutiérrez in a fashion that recalls Marx's vision of the proletariat, affirms that "the future of history belongs to the poor and exploited."² They "are the force that transform history."³ The unitarian vision of the themes of "liberation" and "salvation," "evangelization" and "conscientization" thus converge establishing a powerful religious legitimation for whatever revolutionary praxis the BECs may deem necessary.

As a kind of "revolutionary vanguard," the BECs, as we noticed earlier, are to channel the aspirations of liberation expressed in popular religion into the struggle for liberation. As part of the same process, an attempt is also made to incarnate biblical reflection and religious symbols into the socio-economic and cultural reality. The BECs thus create a "hermeneutic of the people," in which Scripture is used to reflect on concrete reality having its message "actualized, applied to life situations, confronted with reality: basic needs, suffering, rights, struggle."⁴ According to

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¹Dussel, "The Kingdom of God and the Poor," p. 124; cf. below.
²Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 208.
³Gutiérrez, "The Irruption of the Poor," p. 121. The Marxist notion of the proletariat as those having the seeds of the future, seems to mark Gutiérrez' statement. We return to this issue later.
⁴Clodovis Boff, "The nature," p. 56.
Carlos Mesters, the BECs are bringing a reappropriation of Scripture by the poor,¹ who, "mixing life in with the Bible, and the Bible in with life,"² are "making up their own version of the Bible of the Poor,"³ which in turn becomes a source of inspiration, commitment and militance in the struggle for liberation. Scripture, in short, provides less the basis for ethical arguments than a model of historical discernment. This approach to Scripture, evidently, departs from the way in which the Bible was used in traditional Christian theology, yet it is consistent with the sophistication of liberation theologians' hermeneutic circle.⁴

If the process of conscientization includes positively a

¹ Masters affirms that in the BECs, "the Bible has shifted its place and moved to the side of the poor," "The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Commun People," in The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities, p. 207.

² Ibid., p. 206. If the "lives, experiences and struggles" of the poor are the only hermeneutical criteria to interpret the text, (p. 203), it is not surprising that the Bible in the BECs is seen as a mirror: "They [the poor] look in that mirror, see their own faces, and say: we are Abraham! We are in Egypt! We are in bondage!" (pp. 203, 206). In this process of interpretation, as Master affirms later "life takes the first place" (p. 209). Such an approach to Scripture, however, poses the permanent danger of subjectivism and mechanic application of the text.

³ Ibid., p. 201. This interpretation of the Bible, marked by a tendency to give political tone to biblical events or to highlight only their political aspects, has provided inspiration for the BECs' active support of revolutionary forces. Bible symbols, such as the kingdom, the Exodus, death-resurrection, become "mediations" for radical involvements, for example, as in the case of the Nicaraguan revolution (see Berryman, "Basic Communities," pp. 37-39; C. Krauss, "Their 'ible is the Bible," The Nation, July 3, 1982, pp. 7-10).

⁴ See below, pp. 207-214.
reinterpretation or re-reading of Scripture from the perspective of the poor, negatively it presupposes a deideologizing of Christian symbols, doctrines and morality, which are seen as oppressive or as obstacles for liberating forces. In fact, deideologization is followed by reideologization. Accordingly, Christian love is not necessarily opposed to struggle, even class struggle. Salvation and liberation are complementary realities. Conversion is fundamentally "conversion to the neighbour." Sin is more a social and historical fact, and the struggle to build a just society is perceived as an integral and indispensable part of the growth of the kingdom.

1According to a document drawn up by a group of Christians for Socialism at a meeting in Peripán, Spain in 1974, "the bourgeois ideology that has saturated the faith of a somnolent people and has paralyzed it when revolutionary choices are to be made . . . must be contested" ("Cristianos por el Socialismo: Un Camiño definitivamente abierto," in Fierro and Mate, Cristianos por el Socialismo, p. 227). Another document brings under suspicion the entire dogmatic teaching of the Church as the ideology of the status quo ("¿Qué es Cristianos por el Socialismo?" in Fierro and Mate, p. 178; also Los Cristianos y el Socialismo [Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 1973], p. 230).

2Christian doctrines and realities which do not express significance or hold particular reference to the oppressed in their struggle for liberation, though not rejected, are transformed and given a new content better related to the immediate interests of the poor (for a clear example, see Simon S. Maimela "The Atonement in the Context of Liberation Theology," JThSoAfrica 39 [1982]:45-55). Traditionalist approaches to liturgy, regarded as "backward looking and involving the danger of consolidating and sanctifying the status quo," must assume liberationist forms of expression (see Santa Ana, Towards a Church of the Poor, pp. 167-179; Berryman's discussion of "Liberation and the Meaning of Christian Symbols," in Theology in the Americas, pp. 43-49; see Kliever, The Shattered Spectrum, p. 91).

3See Berryman, "Basic Communities," p. 33.

4Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 194.

5We return to liberation theologians' notion of sin later.
The Kingdom, the Church, and the Poor

Attempting to clarify the relationship between the Kingdom and history,¹ the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes, remarked:

Earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom. Nevertheless, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, is of vital concern to the kingdom of God.²

As is generally common in conciliar texts dealing with controversial issues, the language here appears ambiguous and makes room

¹Traditionally this relationship was conceived in terms of (1) a monism, in which the divine and secular history were identified, or (2) a dualistic vision, with a clear distinction between the two histories (see Peter Hübnermann, "Reign of God," in Sacramentum Mundi, ed. K. Rahner, et. al. [New York: Herder and Herder], Vol. 5:233-240; Míguez Bonino, "Reino de Dios e historia: reflexiones para una reflexión del tema," in Reino de Dios y America Latina, ed. René Padilla [El Paso: Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 1975], pp. 7-16). While the first approach—to use Christological language—was marked by a monophysist tendency (confusion between the divine and the human), the second was characterized by a Nestorian inclination (extreme separation between the divine and the human). See Adolfo González Montes, "Reino de Dios e iglesia de Jesucristo: Una aproximación al problema desde el actual contexto teológico," DialEcuménico 8 (1973):45-58. After World War II, new developments took place. On the Protestant side, through the influence of Barthianism, the kingdom came to symbolize God's eschatological gift, a concept marked by the idea of incarnation and service (cf. Míguez Bonino, "¿Cómo actúa Dios en la historia?" CuadernosTeol 15 [1966]:256-262). In more recent times, under the influence of Bonhoeffer, Cox, and Lehmann, the kingdom has been understood mainly in terms of God's presence in history. On the Catholic side a similar process was occurring among theologians of the nouvelle théologie, who in their attempt to overcome a metaphysical and static Thomistic approach to history, exerted considerable influence on the decisions of Vatican II. See McBrien, Catholicism, pp. 1120-1124; Pantelis, Reino de Dios pp. 111-135).

for two different lines of interpretation.¹ The first part of the text poses a distinction between divine and secular history, with the underlying idea of separation between the church and the world of politics. The second part, however, stresses a close relation between both histories, "earthly progress is of vital concern to the kingdom,"² an interpretation which opened new avenues for the presence of the Church in secular history.

In its attempt to translate the conciliar thought to the Latin American reality, the Medellin Conference did not succeed in overcoming the ambiguity of Vatican II. While stressing the second


²This emphasis seems to indicate that the end pursued in both cases is the same, and the criteria for the Church renewal come from the humanization process of society. In agreement with this line of thinking one finds in Vatican II texts a discreet rejection of the doctrine of "two realms:" there are not "two separate orders" but one "and the same grace raises human beings to a supernatural level" (see Gaudium et Spes, nos. 22, 24 and 29). Parallel to this indication, the concept of kingdom came to occupy a central place in writings on political theology as the biblical notion which most directly relates to the aspirations for social justice, revolutionary change and a utopian future. As C. Sugden notes, "The kingdom of God is the key category for approaching the question of political theology" ("A Different Dream: Jesus and Revolution," ThStFlBul 71 [1975]:15; cf., J. Andrew Kirk, "The Kingdom, the Church and a Distressed World," Chmn. 94 [1980]:126-144). See the official report of the Third World Conference on Mission and Evangelism, held in Melbourne, may 1980, in Your Kingdom Come (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980).
line of interpretation in the document on poverty, the Conference retained the first in the document on peace.\(^1\) Unhappy with this imprecise position, liberation theologians have consistently adopted the second interpretation, the *lectio difficilior*, of *Gaudium et Spes*.

The discontinuity between kingdom and general history, between the building of the kingdom and action on sociopolitical structures must be abandoned.\(^2\) Strong emphasis, thus, is placed on the social and political dimension of the kingdom, with the underlying stress on the role of human effort in the political realm. "The growth of the Kingdom," Gutiérrez argues, "is a process which occurs historically in liberation, insofar as liberation means a greater fulfillment of man."\(^3\) Even though the coming of the kingdom and the building up of

\(^1\)See *The Church in Present-day Transformation*, pp. 172-179, 46-57.

\(^2\)Although liberation theologians differ in emphasis in their approach to this question, the common denominator in their conceptions is that the kingdom and historical liberation have the same eschatological end (see Gutiérrez, *A Theology*, pp. 21-37, 72, 212; Míguez Bonino; *Doing Theology*, pp. 132-153; also idem, "Reino de Dios e historia: reflexiones para una reflexión del tema," pp. 3-23; Assmann, *Opresión-Liberación*, p. 154; idem, "Political Commitment in the Context of the Class Struggle," *Con 84 C1973*:93-101; idem, *Theology of a Nomad Church* pp, 67-68). For an extended analysis of the kingdom-history relation as articulated by the main liberation theologians, see Pantelis, *Reino de Dios*, pp. 160-220. Appealing to some texts of Vatican II, they can argue that the basic theological foundation of their position is not heterodox (see Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, p. 143).

\(^3\)Gutiérrez, *A Theology*, p. 177. For liberation theologians there is an intrinsic relation between sin, salvation, and the kingdom on the one hand, and the historical process and struggle for sociopolitical freedom on the other. Gutiérrez defends this connection on the basis a three interrelated levels of liberation: (1) liberation
a just society are distinct, they are mutually affecting levels of the same reality and parts of a single all-emcompassing salvific process. If the kingdom is not to be equated to temporal progress, without liberating historical events, there would be no growth of the kingdom. The struggle for justice is the struggle for and the precondition of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, it is in the active commitment to the construction of a new "historical project" that men participate in the creation of the kingdom by bringing about the liberation of men in history.

from the selfishness of sin, (2) the aspiration of the oppressed for liberation, and (3) the historical process of liberation culminating in a qualitatively new society (chap. 2). The clue to understanding the unity of the three levels of liberation is the concept of utopia, located at an intermediate level where faith and political action enter into meaningful relation through the common historical project of the creation of a new man in a new society (pp. 232-239. See Gudorf, Catholic Social Teachings, pp. 61, 62). Utopia, according to modern science and as L. Boff, remarks, "does not have the negative meaning of illusion or flight from the conflictive reality of the world. It possesses a highly positive depth and signifies that . . . Man can rise above his own historical constructions and project a not-yet-experienced but still possible reality" ("Statement by L. Boff," Theology in the Americas, p. 295). From this perspective, "The utopia of the Kingdom of God . . . surpasses the totality of the concrete forms of this world in function of another, more human and more open to the coming of God" (ibid).

\[1\] Gutierrez, A Theology, 176-177.

\[2\] Ibid., p. 168. The kingdom of God is identical with the struggle of liberation as far as its mechanism of fulfilment is concerned. It is distinct from the process insofar as the complete fulfilment of the kingdom is always future and always reveals present achievement as provisional, impermanent, and incomplete (pp. 153, 168, 177, 198-199, 255). It appears that this is the only discontinuity that is maintained by liberation theology (i.e. the discontinuity between the perfection of a continually reprojected kingdom-utopia--and the imperfection of all its historical manifestations (see Knapp, "Critique: Miguez Bonino, Gutierrez," p. 131).
In fact, according to Segundo, "the view that man, on a political as well as individual basis constructs the kingdom of God here and now," is "common and basic for all liberation theologians." Thus, while progressive European and North American theology are criticized for obscuring the sense of human responsibility in the political arena liberation theologians see a causal relationship between the growth of the kingdom and men's political action oriented toward humanization and liberation. What happens in a liberation process, Segundo insists, is an integral part of the growth of the kingdom and not—as argued by Europeans Moltmann and Metz—just an "analogical image."

Seen from the perspective of liberation theology, "earthly progress," and the "growth of the kingdom," is understood primarily

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1Segundo, "Capitalism and Socialism," p. 112, emphasis supplied. Gutiérrez, however, as a creative and subtle thinker, holds a more complex position. Attempting to protect man's autonomy and free creativity, he wants to say that the kingdom is a work of man (A Theology, p. 122); on the other hand, to protect God's sovereignty he underlines that it is above all a gift of God (p. 177). Thus while affirming that "political liberating event is the growth of the kingdom and is a salvific event; he stresses that this is not the coming of the kingdom, not all of salvation (ibid).

2Ibid. 112-115. Segundo sees the neutrality of recent political theologies (both Catholic and Protestant) towards political choices as a result of the influence of two central doctrines of Lutheran theology: Luther's thesis of justification by faith without work (p. 112), and the doctrine of the "two kingdoms" (The Liberation of Theology, pp. 142-146) In recent times these stances have been charged as responsible for the depoliticization of the faith in a positive sense, leading to sociopolitical quietism and evasion, and providing an "ideology of reaction" to conservative groups (cf. Cox, The Secular City, pp. 107-110; James S. Preus, "The Political Function of Luther's Doctrina," ConTheolMonthly 43 [1972]:595-599).

3Segundo, "Capitalism-Socialism," pp. 112-115. Liberation
as the liberation and humanization of the oppressed from their shocking state of alienation, a situation in flat contradiction to the values of the kingdom of God, to which the church must witness and herald. Thus, as Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom, framed within the eschatological expectations of his times, was expressed in liberating deed, today the message of the kingdom must be grasped in the light of present experience. In contemporary Latin America, Leonardo Boff asserts, the kingdom "expresses a people's utopian longing for liberation from everything that alienates them: pain, hunger, injustice, death."

1 Theologians reject Metz' "eschatological proviso" expressed by the notion that the church must relativize any form of political absolutism (A Theology of the World, p. 134), as an "ideological distortion" (cf. McCann, Christian Realism, p. 175). The church must take a stand on vital issues facing the human family, at least opting for the overall structure within which these issues will be solved, i.e., socialism rather than a capitalistic society (Segundo, "Capitalism-Socialism," pp. 112ff). Liberation theologians opt for a socialist social order not only as the only viable form of social life for Latin Americans, but also as an active historical correlation of the kingdom (see Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 111-112; Míguez Bonino, "Reino de Dios" p. 21; Segundo, Masa y minorías, p. 108). Thus, one is easily inclined to infer that for liberation theologians not only the dualism between the life of faith and temporal works, but also the dualism or pluralism of different political options should definitely be abolished. This tendency to find a parallel between Christian eschatology and the socialist project, however, can be understood as the result of contemporary de-emphasis on the transcendent dimensions of the kingdom of God and simultaneous stress on "a this-worldly condition of realized humanism" (see Andrija Kresić, "The Kingdom of God and Communism," JecSt 15 [1978]:38-40; cf. Vree, "Christian Marxists," pp. 37-47).

1 L. Boff, "Salvation in Jesus Christ and the Process of Liberation," Conc 96 (1974):81-99. As a transforming force, the kingdom must overcome sin, not only personal sin, but sin in its social and collective dimensions (Sobrino, Christology, p. 53). For Gutiérrez, the announcement of the kingdom presupposes the defense of the poor and the punishment of oppressors (A Theology, 167).
To avoid the danger of spiritualization, an approach which traditionally has minimized Christian presence in the real world and led to moral passivity, liberation theologians, as one might expect, parallel with the attempt to overcome a centuries-old dualism and discontinuity between the kingdom of God and general history, manifest a very distrustful attitude towards any future-oriented eschatology. Miranda, more forthright in his treatment of the eschaton than other Latin American theologians, contends that the kingdom comes on earth.¹ With Christ "the new age has already been (fully) established, and we are therefore free ... to practice that real justice which, through our commitment to our fellow human beings, will eventually bring the eschatological kingdom."² In Latin

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¹Miranda, Marx and the Bible, pp. 202ff; cf. J. Miranda Marx Against the Marxists (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1978), pp. 264-284; Communism in the Bible (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982), pp. 12-17; cf. Gutierrez, A Theoology, p. 167. For a summary of Miranda's attempt to elaborate a realized eschatology, see "The Kingdom Will Come," in Kirk Liberation Theology, pp. 136-140. For Miranda "only a realized eschatology makes possible a practical obedience to God's transcendent word of challenge to bring into being a world-order of justice, peace and brotherhood" (ibid., p. 136). When the emphasis falls on the "not yet," he contends, the urgency of the present praxis of justice, and the work for actual radical changes in man's present situation, tend to be removed or to become relative. Although the notion of a "realized eschatology" is not new (for a summary and bibliography see Norman Perrin, The Kingdom of God in the Teachings of Jesus [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963], pp. 58-78), Miranda's exegetical approach, emerges in response to a new motivation: i.e., the need of liberating the poor.

²Miranda, Marx and the Bible, 211. Miranda argues that the great similarity between Marx and the Bible is hope in an eschaton. Both believe that justice will be attained in this world (p. 217; see Fierro's critique to Miranda on this point, The Militant Gospel, p 373; cf. Arthur McGovern, Marxism: and American Christian Perspective, p. 194). See Kirk, "Critique: Marx & the Bible," Sojourners, 6 (Jan. 1977):36. Reading Miranda one is left with the
America, to be "good news to the poor" the message of the kingdom must be redefined and placed within the context of historical liberation and in relation to the role of human effort in the political realm.\(^1\) When the notion of the kingdom loses its "original political and social roots,"\(^2\) it is argued, it must be discarded as a "dangerous trap" for the poor, who in their misery and frustrated needs are easily susceptible to all forms of evasions from historical reality.\(^3\) Instead of passive expectation, therefore, "we must analyse the present reality to discover the way to the kingdom."\(^4\)

\(^{1}\)The notion that the kingdom, at least partially, is fashioned by man's efforts in the socio-political realm is present throughout the writings of liberation theologians. Gutiérrez is particularly optimistic about man's capability in overcoming the chains of oppression, establishing a just society and thus cooperating with God in the construction of the kingdom (see A Theology, pp. 113; 207-208; 213-250). Man is outgrowing his present condition, he insists, and entering in a new era, in a world fashioned by his own hands. "We live on the verge of man's epiphany, his anthropophany" (A Theology, p. 213). Echoing this emphasis Dussel writes "we just fashion the kingdom through concrete historical projects" (History and the Theology of Liberation, p. 170; cf. L. Boff, Jesus Christ Liberator, pp. 56-57). O. Maqueo, in his extended work on liberation theology, justifies this emphasis on man as the agent who transforms society, which in turn becomes the place where a new man can evolve, on the assumption that salvation takes place in history; the goal is "instaurar el Reinado de Dios aqui en la tierra como un nuevo orden de justicia" (Liberación y teología, p. 14).


\(^{3}\)Ibid.

\(^{4}\)Ibid.
Significantly, one finds a noticeable convergence between the role Marx assigned to the proletarian masses and the mission liberation theologians attribute to the poor. In both the resolution of history and the process through which the here-and-now justice is achieved lie in the struggle of the oppressed. In a definite effort to establish a close connection between the kingdom of God and the poor—a relation decisively important if Christian symbols are to relate to the process of their liberation—Dussel, for example, argues that the poor are the "active subject and carriers of the kingdom." As such, the poor cannot accept things as they are with resignation and passivity. "Jesus' priority for the poor," Dussel

1Dussel, "The Kingdom of God" p. 124. By having no part in the prevalent system (which is a negation of God's kingdom) the poor are within the kingdom, since "non-possession and marginality in the present system are possession and participation in the kingdom" (p. 122).

2"Any passive acceptance of the powers of the order of oppression," Dussel argues, "is a denial of the kingdom . . . if the poor accept things as they are with resignation, then in that very acceptance they reject their real share in the future kingdom" (p. 123). For Dussel, as for Assmann ("Statement," pp. 299-300, cf. above) the privileged poor are the struggling poor. He insists that "inorganically the poor are 'the multitude' in misery. Yet organically they are 'the people' and in this positive sense the active subjects and carriers of the kingdom of God" (p. 121). The "multitude" must become a "people," "organically called to transformation, as an emerging class or nation the carrier-subject of the kingdom, they become the people—laós (p. 124). Marxist anthropology and eschatology, particularly expressed in the notion of the proletariat as the class with a special destiny in history, seems evident in liberation theologians. In Dussel, as in Gutiérrez, however, the struggling poor seems to have been transformed into a theological category, the people of God (laós), the chosen class. "in them [the poor]." Gutiérrez tells us, "the Lord saves history" (A Theology, p. 208).
goes on, "calls them to take part in the struggle,"¹ This struggle, the liberating praxis of the poor, as understood by Dussel, is not only a "contributive fact in the kingdom," or the act by which the kingdom advances from its "already" to its "not yet."² It is also the "very activity of the kingdom in history."³ In fact the poor are the mediators of the kingdom, who "co-labour to build it."⁴

Shifting the locus of the saving work of God from the Church to the ongoing process of historical liberation, identified as the very activity of the kingdom, Latin America theologians of liberation convoke the Church to participate in the transformation of the world on behalf of and alongside the poor, "which is another way of saying on behalf and alongside God, since God is among the poor."⁵ For Dussel, the Church has evangelism for its calling, but,

To evangelize is to bring good news to the poor, to turn the many into a people and to make that people aware of the destiny that God has prepared for them: the kingdom. Not just aware, but active, now that there is a real possibility of conquering sin, of restoring their wealth to the poor and of building an order in which there will be neither rich nor poor, neither oppressors not oppressed.

¹Dussel, "The Kingdom of God and the Poor," p. 125.
²Ibid., p. 123
⁴Dussel, "The Kingdom of God and the Poor," p. 125. This point is also emphasized by Alejandro Cusinovich: "The kingdom of God is revealed and concretized in history in the struggle of all poor and the exploited for justice, freedom and love" (Religious Life and the Poor [Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1979], p. 125).
⁵McAffe Brown, A Theology in a New Key, p. 73.
⁶Dussel, "The Kingdom of God and the Poor," p. 125. The
The dominant element of the ecclesiology of liberation theology which emerges from our preceding discussion is the understanding of the Church fully committed to the concrete situation of contemporary Latin America. Since sin is basically a social reality, salvation is located in the historical social realm. The Church must abandon self-centered concerns and find its mission in the service of the oppressed, not ethically or paternalistically being "for the poor," but being essentially "of the poor," adopting their perspective and struggles. Distinction between the life of faith and temporal works must be abolished. Thus, the task of the church is determined in terms of the concrete historical realities in which it finds itself. Without evasion, the Church must also make its own members aware of their oppressed condition, affirm their humanity and motivate them to take responsibility for the quality of their lives. As a sign of the kingdom, the ecclesial community must truly announce the good news of the kingdom, which is considered as an integral part of the revolutionary process seeking to abolish injustice and build a more human order.

affirmation "the possibility of conquering sin" is framed within liberation theologians' notion of sin, which emphasizes the collective sense of sin, sin of the "oppressive structures" (Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 175). For Dussel, this is the "essence of sin" ("The Kingdom of God" p. 125). Once sin is identified as "oppression of the poor, the denial to them of the fruits of their work" (ibid), to destroy the oppressive structures can easily be equated to "conquering sin," and the "building of the kingdom" as indicated by Dussel (p. 129; see also Antonio Moser, "Sin as Negation of the Kingdom," TD 30 [1982]:27-31). This notion of sin radically affects the mission of the church, which tend to give exclusive priority to social changes (Juan Schvindt, "Ecclesiologia y reino de Dios en G. Gutiérrez," CuadernosTeol 7 [1982]:51-61).
To be effective, the Church's involvement in the cause of the oppressed must be illuminated by the use of social class analysis. The identity of the poor, as disclosed "scientifically" by the Marxist "dialectic of history," prevents easy spiritualization of the term poor and the condition of poverty. Furthermore, once the Church's commitment to the oppressed is defined in terms of class struggle, classic paternalism, which traditionally has transformed the poor into a passive object of the Church's charity, is definitely rejected. According to liberation theologians, the poor must be the active agents of their own liberation. As such they are considered "the artisans of a new humanity," the "subject and carriers of the kingdom. "Continuing this investigation, the remaining part of this chapter is devoted to an analysis of liberation theology's hermeneutical approach to the Bible. The main intention here is to illuminate the ways in which liberationist vision of the poor, framed within the class struggle polarization, affects its selective reading and re-interpretation of Scripture.

The Biblia Pauperum

In its attempt to give theological interpretation to the Church's solidarity with the Latin American plight and resulting commitment to revolutionary praxis, liberation theology, as an integral element of its innovative methodology, has developed a new way of reading Scripture as the Biblia Pauperum.\(^1\) Sharing with

\(^1\)According to Ernest Bloch, the Marxist philosopher who has greatly influence political theologies, there are two different
Moltmann the conviction that "reading the Bible with the eyes of the poor is a different thing from reading it with a full belly,"\(^1\) liberation theologians ask the hermeneutical question cui bono? -- in whose advantage is the reading of the Bible?\(^2\) Before focusing on liberation theology's interpretation of some crucial texts, however, we attempt first to understand its hermeneutical approach.

The Hermeneutical Circle

Convinced not only that no complete detachment or value-neutrality is possible, but also that the neutral observer is already committed to maintain the status quo--even if he or she does not admit it, liberation theology affirms that the theologian must make his/her stance explicit and take an advocacy position in favor of the poor. Since the God of the Bible is the God of the oppressed, to truly understand the Bible is to read it through the eyes of the oppressed. Thus, "for a correct interpretation of the Bible, it is

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\(^1\)Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit, p. 17.

\(^2\)Segundo argues that "one must ask of the interpreter . . . in whose interest is he interpreting Scripture?" ("Interview with J. Emmette Weir," cited in "The Bible and Marx," p. 349).
necessary to acknowledge the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed and to develop a hermeneutics from below.¹

The central methodological tool in this approach involves a dynamic exegesis,² called by Segundo the hermeneutical circle. At the most fundamental level, Segundo's model entails "the continuous change in our interpretation of the Bible, in function of the continuous changes in our present reality, both individual and social."³ This preliminary description, then, is further expanded by the delineation of four interrelated stages: (1) A way of experiencing reality that leads to ideological suspicion; (2) application of ideological suspicion to ideological superstructures and to theology; (3) new ways of experiencing theological reality that lead to exegetical suspicion, and (4) the creation of a new hermeneutic or a

¹Elisabeth S. Fiorenza, "Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation and Liberation Theology," in The Challenge of Liberation Theology, p. 100. In this context Fiorenza is discussing the "Interpretative Model of Juan Luis Segundo."

²Criticizing the traditional hermeneutical approach, Segundo, reacts against the use of a "static" exegesis, which is marked by literalism and does not take into account the changes and ever-increasing complexity which have elapsed since biblical times. To define its essential relationship to the modern world, the Church must approach the Bible in a dynamic way. See "América hoy," Vispera (August 1967):53-57; "Teología: Mensaje y proceso," Perspectivas de Diálogo (December, 1974):259-270; see also "Haciá una exegesis dinámica," Vispera (October 1967):77-84; Masas y minorías en la dialéctica de la liberación (Buenos Aires: Aurora, 1973), p. 94.

³Segundo, The Liberation Theology, p. 8. In other words, the interpretation of the biblical text will change according to present reality, otherwise "new questions would either receive no answer or else answers that are conservative and useless." A. Hennelly, Theologies in Conflict (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 109.
new interpretation of the Bible with new elements at one's disposal.¹

Basically, as Segundo explains it, the first stage of the circle is marked by a critical examination of a definite problem in society from a perspective committed to human liberation. As applied to the Latin American scene, it involves the experience of the problem of poverty and presupposes a conscious commitment or partiality for the poor and their struggle for liberation. This partiality or pre-commitment to the poor, however, as Segundo explains it, is accepted "not on the basis of theological criteria . . . but on the basis of human criteria."²

¹Segundo, The Liberation of Theology, pp. 8-9. For detailed discussion, see Henneley's Theologies in Conflict, pp. 108-119 and "The Challenge of Juan Luis Segundo," THST 39 (1977): 126. The "hermeneutic circle" is tested against the works of four individuals: Harvey Cox in The Secular City, Karl Marx in his critique on religion, Max Weber on Calvinism and capitalism, and James Cone in A Black Theology of Liberation (Segundo, The Liberation of Theology, pp. 10-34). While Cox, Marx, and Weber fail, according to Segundo, Cone—in his (1) commitment to the liberation of the black community, (2) reconsideration of reality and its superstructure, posing a challenge to white ideologies, (3) elaboration of a serviceable theology, and (4) return to Scripture prepared for a new interpretation of its message—is the only one to complete the circle.

²Ibid., p. 13. Likewise, Assmann argues that this precommitment to the poor is essentially an ethical one. Teología desde la praxis de la liberación: (Salamanca: Sigueme, 1971), p. 105. Since impartiality is not possible, this partial option for the poor is adopted as a conscious ideology, regarded as necessary to prevent theology from becoming an ideological expression of the self-interest of the bourgeoisie. Reacting against this stance of "partiality," Richard J. Neuhaus argues that while one may have no illusions about the absolute "objectivity" that can be sustained in any discipline, the integrity of a discipline depends in part upon a serious effort to maintain some critical distance from any form of advocacy. "Liberation Theology and the Captivities of Jesus," Worldview (June 1973): 45. The question, evidently, is whether an interpretation of the Bible committed to the poor will not ultimately prove itself as distortional as the previous one committed to the rich.

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At the second step, the ideological suspicion is applied to the whole ideological superstructure and the theology produced by it. At this point, doing theology in a context marked by socio-economic injustice, liberation theologians conclude that to unmask the oppressive forces at work in the system, one must be able to interpret present reality. Thus, the cry of the poor, to be properly understood, must be heard through the medium of the social sciences which analyze and disclose the causes of poverty and oppression. At this juncture, in need of "an analytical, sociological, and structural reading of reality that is as scientific as possible," liberation theology turns to Marxist constructs as the sharpest tool for social analysis from the perspective of the oppressed.

The third level of the hermeneutical circle—which indeed is a critical reflection on the traditional interpretation of Scripture—verifies a movement from ideological suspicion to hermeneutical suspicion. Theological reality is experienced from a new perspective, a perception which leads not only to the conclusion that the prevailing interpretation of the Bible has been serving the

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1Leonardo Boff, Liberating Grace (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 79. For Gutiérrez, "analysis of reality is a precondition if we are to be able to change it" ("The Irruption of the Poor, p. 109). Furthermore, sociological analysis will decide the content of what Assmann calls an "effective historical hermeneutic whose center of concern is actual history, and not simply history of the past, of the word of God" (Teología desde la praxis, p. 103).

2See above, pp. 160-167. Míguez Bonino remarks that in their struggle for social justice, liberation theologians have been led "to discover the un substitutable relevance of Marxism. Christians and Marxists, the Mutual Challenge to Revolution (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976), p. 19.
interests of the dominant classes but also to a commitment to fashion a theology to correspond to the vision of the oppressed.

The fourth and final stage is the creation of a new hermeneutics. The insights of the previous steps converge to a new interpretation of Scripture from the perspective of a socio-economic or political stance in favor of the poor. Coming to the text not merely with a pre-understanding, as Bultmann argued, but with a pre-involvement, the interpreter has the eyes prepared for a revolutionary appraisal of the Scriptural message. Insisting that the meaning of the biblical text is disclosed only in social action,

\[1\] In this connection, the conviction emerged that the traditional interpretation of Scripture has failed to take important pieces of data into account (Segundo, The Liberation of Theology, p. 9). Miguez Bonino, for example, asks why the obvious political motifs and undertones in the life of Jesus have remained so hidden to theologians until recently (Doing Theology, p. 91). Or as Thomas D. Hanks questions, why themes like "poor," "poverty," and "oppression" which are dominant notions in the Bible have received practically no attention from First-World biblical erudition, which pretends to treat all the principal motives and virtually all the minor ones in the Bible. God So Loved the Third World (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1983), pp. ix-x. Are these omissions merely an oversight on the part of First-World theologians or an expression of their ideological bias? For McAfee Brown, First-World theology reads the Bible through a selective lens: "We read what we can bear to read, we hear what is tolerable to hear, and we evade or 'spiritualize' those parts which leave us uncomfortable, if not outraged" (Theology in a New Key, p. 81).


mediated by Marx’s analysis of society—which in turn becomes a hermeneutical key to a second-reading of the Bible—liberation theology starts out from the contemporary praxis as the primary theological locus, proceeding backwards to the canonical text in search for a "usable past," to guide their commitment to social transformation today.

In short, if on the one hand the hermeneutic circle implies an ideology suspicious of previous reading of Scripture, seen as a result of a capitalistic mind-set, on the other hand it creates a new interpretation which seeks to understand the Bible from a specific social location, i.e., from the perspective of the poor.\(^1\)

Marxist insights are an integral part of the hermeneutic method of liberation theology. As Kirk notes, "The classical Marxist interpretation of all 'written' history as 'the history of class struggles' is accepted as a sine qua non of a correct ideological stance in respect both of understanding modern society and of interpreting God's message of liberation in the so called 'signs of the times,' this latter to be considered the contemporary pole of the hermeneutical circle" ("Bible in Latin American," p. 164, n. 4; cf. Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 272-285; E. Moncada, "Presentación," in Liberación en América Latina [Bogotá: Servicio Colombiano de Comunicación, 1972], p. 158; Assmann, Teología desde la praxis, p. 173). A common denominator among liberation theologians is the hermeneutical proposition that the Bible cannot be interpreted faithfully unless contextualized within the commitment to the struggles of the poor (Kirk, The Bible in Latin America, pp. 157-165). "Is it possible," Segundo asks, "to know and recognize the liberation message of the gospel without a prior commitment to liberation?" (The Liberation of Theology, p. 81). His answer echoes Gutiérrez, "only by participation in their [the poor's] struggles can we understand the implications of the gospel message and make it have an impact in history" (p. 83; cf. Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 269).

\(^2\)Assmann talks about the "epistemological privilege of the poor" in reading Scripture ("Statement," p. 300). This notion, common among liberation theologians is to a great extent based on the notion that the poor are closer to the situation of the biblical writers who...
Furthermore, since liberation theology does not pretend to give a timeless and universal reading of Scripture, its biblical hermeneutic is marked by a tendency to selectiveness and radicalization. It starts from those texts which are functional and render best service to the urgencies and emphasis of a continent in need of liberation, and interprets them in the light of the pre-commitment to the struggles of the poor. This approach is clearly assumed by Segundo:

I hope that it is quite clear that the Bible is not the discourse of a universal God to a universal man. Partiality is justified because we must find and designate as the word of God, that part of divine revelation which today, in the light of our concrete historical situation, is most useful for the liberation to which God summons us.

Not surprisingly, within Scripture, liberation theology finds two foundational revelatory events as expressing the hermeneutical privilege of the poor par excellence: first the Exodus, and second the life and teachings of Jesus, particularly with emphasis on specific texts of the Gospel of Luke. In both cases, the emphasis wrote their message "out of the experience of oppressed people ... for the liberation of oppressed people." McAfee Brown, "The Rootedness of All Theology," ChrCris 37 (1977):172; also idem, Gustavo Gutiérrez, pp. 57-58; Justo González and Catherine González, Liberating Preaching, p. 16.

1 Segundo, The Liberation of Theology, p. 33; emphasis supplied.

2 See Lee Cormie, "The Hermeneutical Privilege of the Oppressed: Liberation Theologies, Biblical Faith, and Marxist Sociology of Knowledge," in The Catholic Theological Society of America, Proceedings of the Thirty-Third Annual Convention, pp. 155-181. Cormie's basic argument is that recent scholarship which stresses the importance of relating the social context of the revelatory events with the theological content of this revelation, supports liberation theology's claim that the experience of the oppressed is a privileged hermeneutical ground.
lies on the notion of God's political partisanship with the poor and oppressed. Mainly from these texts, to the analysis of which we devote the remaining part of this chapter, liberation theology elaborates the biblical support for its vision of the poor as well as for the church's involvement in their struggle.

The God Who Takes Sides

The Exodus and Latin America

The present-day Latin American experience of oppression and dependency leads liberation theologians logically back to the biblical account of the exodus of Israel from Egypt with overwhelming emphasis on the close similarity between the two situations. Not entirely surprising, the Exodus motif became "the privileged text," the "biblical basis for liberation struggles." Following the basic conclusions of historical-critical exegetes, liberation theologians maintain that the Exodus tradition,

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1. See Roberto Sartor, "Exodo-Liberación," RBibArg 33 (1971): 76. Assmann notes that the Exodus motif is mentioned with impressive frequency in contemporary Latin American documents, with a correlation between "the freeing Israel and the hour of Latin America" (Practical Theology of Liberation, p. 66). For an extended discussion of the use of the Exodus by liberation theologians, see Dupertuis, Liberation Theology's Use of the Exodus, chap. 2.


through a long interpretative process, came to be the central theme of the Old Testament. For Gutiérrez the Exodus experience is "paradigmatic." Its memory pervades the pages of the Bible and became for the biblical writer, the archetypal event through which

1The actual text of the Exodus, in a fashion which recalls Gerhard von Rad's "re-telling" theory (see von Rad, Old Testament Theology, 2 vols. [New York: Harper and Row, 1962-1963], 1:121), is seen as the product of an interpretative process (Croatto "El hombre en el mundo según Génesis," RevBib 1 [1972]:44; Miranda, Marx and the Bible, pp. 88ff; cf. KirK, Liberation Theology, pp. 103-105). This understanding as we shall see, becomes crucial for a new reinterpretation of the Exodus event from the Latin American perspective. Thus, the original story of the Exodus starts with a Semitic group that migrated to Egypt between the eighteenth and the sixteenth centuries and were there made slaves (John Topel, The Way to Peace. Liberation through the Bible [Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1979], p. 2; KirK, pp. 96-97); cf. von Rad 1:13; Jan Dus, "Moses or Joshua? On the Problem of the Founder of the Israelite Religion," in The Bible and Liberation, pp. 26-41). Eventually this semi-nomadic people became conscious of the possibility of liberation, and somehow inspired by their God, who then revealed himself as Yahweh, were able to fight their way to freedom. See Carlos Mesters, La Palabra de Dios (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1972): p. 10; Assmann, Opression-Liberación, p. 120; idem, Practical Theology, p. 66. Through a long process of hermeneutical re-readings in the light of subsequent history, the original Exodus-event acquired new meaning and became the foundation of the religious faith in Israel, giving focus to the various traditions of the Old Testament. Although liberation theologians "affirm that the Exodus from Egypt took place in history" (Daniel J. Harrington, The Light of All Nations [Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1982], p. 193), they make clear that the narrative fixed in the present biblical text is the product of constant reinterpretation, and "says" much more than what originally happened. Severe objections to this dualistic version of Israel's history, however, have been posed against its main proponent namely, von Rad (see Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Problem of History in Old Testament Theology," AUSS 8 [1979]:36-50).

they interpreted their entire history as salvation history.¹

Liberation, thus, it is argued, is not some newly arrived concept, but the very center of the biblical kerygma.² Nor is it paradigmatic for Israel's faith alone. In its "reservoir of meaning,"³ it has become a projected message for all people at all times. Essentially linked to man's divine vocation for freedom against any form of servitude, the meaning of the Exodus transcends a limited salvation-history and embraces the on-going, global salvation of history. "With the Exodus," remarks Gutiérrez, "a new age has struck for humanity: redemption from misery."⁴

¹Gutiérrez, ibid., pp. 158-9. In spite of this insistence on the importance of the Exodus, liberation theologians have hardly devoted any detailed exegetical study to the text. The more extensive and careful treatment of the Exodus has been done by the prolific biblical exegete José Miranda in Marx and the Bible. Miranda's dominant emphasis is that Yahweh is the God who invades human history to side with the oppressed (pp. 77-108). His conclusions, however, have attracted severe criticism from scholars such as John L. McKenzie. See JBL 94 (1975):280-281.

²Croatto, Exodus, p. 27; Kirk, Liberation Theology, p. 100.

³Croatto, Exodus, pp. 12ff.

⁴Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 158. Applying its significance to the Latin American scene, Croatto points out that "the 'memory' of the Exodus becomes a provocative Word, an announcement of liberation for us, the oppressed peoples of the Third World. We are enjoined to prolong the Exodus event because it was not an event solely for the Hebrews but rather the manifestation of a liberative plan of God for all peoples" (Exodus, pp. 14-15). According to liberation theology, the salvific event of the Exodus, should be understood today in the same way as the Hebrews understood it, hermeneutically exploring its meaning in the light of our own experience. Hardly surprising, thus, for Croatto, "exegesis is eisegesis" (p. 2), i.e. it is the present that really allows us to enter into the meaning of the old text (ibid.).
Furthermore, since the existential present is the "given," which is prior to any reading of the biblical text, liberation theology's re-interpretation of the Exodus motif does not move from a "pure" exegesis of the text to its application to the oppressive situation in Latin America. Rather, it starts from the Latin American reality, which is accepted as the key which opens up the "reserve of meaning" of the kerygma of God's Word for the people living "in economic, political, social and cultural bondage." It is the present Sitz im Leben that determines which aspect of the text will be emphasized and used. Consequently, in interpreting the Exodus

1 The Latin American perspective, within the Marxist framework of the oppressor/oppressed contradiction, is read into the text, to provide its correct isegetical interpretation. What emerges from this particular methodology is a revolutionary understanding of the Exodus. Moses' work of persuasion is equivalent to a process of conscientization (Croatto, Liberacion y libertad, p. 36); the attempt to exterminate the Hebrew race by infanticide is parallel to the genocidal "sterilisation" that is practiced in Latin America under the euphemism of "family planning" orchestrated by the North Americans (Croatto, Exodus, p. 18; Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 159); the increase of the Hebrews (Exod 1:9-14), given as the excuse for further repression, can be compared to today's population explosion in the Third World. In both cases, the rich and privileged countries feel threatened (Kirk, Liberation Theology, pp. 103-104). In short, Latin American oppressed are passing through experiences similar to those described in the first fifteen chapters of Exodus: "repression," "oppression," "alienated work," and "humiliation" (Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 156). See John Goldingay's discussion on "Egypt and Latin America," in "The Man of War and the Suffering Servant: The Old Testament and the Theology of Liberation," TynBul 27 (1976):81.

2 Croatto, Exodus, pp. 10, 13, 82

3 Ibid., p. 15.

4 J. S. Croatto, "Liberar a los pobres: aproximación hermeneutica," in Los Pobres (Buenos Aires: Editorial la Aurora, 1978), pp. 15-25. Precisely for this reason, as Croatto says, "the re-reading of the Exodus account--as an existential 're-reading'--becomes a
narrative in the light of contemporary Latin American reality, contrary to traditional theology which consistently tended to spiritualize it, liberation theology retains the social and political nature of the event.¹

Since "the liberator God of the Exodus cannot contradict himself accepting oppression in another historical juncture,"³ the Exodus is in fact paradigmatic for Latin Americans struggling for liberation. "It [the Exodus] remains vital and contemporary due to similar historical experiences which the People of God undergo."⁴ The expression People of God here is crucial; it casts light on liberation theology's understanding of the poor.

As indicated earlier, with the polarization that marked the post-Medellín period the meaning of the expression People of God promise for us [Latin Americans]," (Exodus, p. 15). Elsewhere Croatto admits that this approach involves a danger of reductionism; however, he states that it is "preferible asumir ese riesgo antes que anquilosar la palabra de Dios" (p. 27).

¹Segundo Galilea states that "Latin American theology has restored the Exodus to its political symbolism and has seen in Moses an authentic politician guiding the people toward a better society." "Liberation as an Encounter with Politics and Contemplation," Concl 6 (June 1976):31. Although liberation theologians admit that the Exodus was an "act indissolubly political and religious" (Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 157, Galilea, "Liberation as an Encounter" p.30), the dominant stress falls on the social political overtones of the event (see John Langan "Liberation Theology in a Northern Context," America 140 [1979]:46). For an articulated opposition to liberation political hermeneutic of the Exodus typology, see Arthur Glasser, Contemporary Theologies of Mission (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), pp. 161-164; also John R. W. Stott, Christian Mission in the Modern World (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity, 1975), pp. 97,98.

²Croatto, Liberación y Libertad, p. 39.

³A Theology, p. 159.
departed radically from Vatican II's usage. In a clear association with the Exodus motif, the expression took on a specific political connotation. The poor and oppressed, became the modern counterpart of the oppressed slaves among whom Yahweh revealed himself in the primal liberation. This identification became possible because, affirming the precedence of the event (liberation) over the word (promise), liberation theologians assume, though without much effort to justify it historically, that God's intervention in favor of Israel was not merely the result of his faithfulness to his people. Rather, he was only responding to the cry of the oppressed, who could have been any oppressed group. This point becomes crucial for liberation theology's hermeneutical method, since, as Goldingay pointedly observes,

If Yahweh acts primarily out of loyalty to his own people, this may well cut the ground away from under the application of the Exodus idea to a nation today—for no nation today is God's people as Israel was at this time.

Following the insights of the documentary hypothesis,

1McCann, p. 214. At the Introduction to its final documents, the Medellín Conference stated that "just as Israel of old, the first People (of God), felt the saving presence of God when He delivered them from the oppression of Egypt," the oppressed majority of Latin Americans "the new People of God," cannot cease to feel his saving presence in their midst today (The Church in the Present-day Transformation, p. 28; also Sarto, "Exodo-Liberacion, p. 76). See Gerhard Sauter "Case-Study of the Use of Allegory and Misunderstood Analogies in Ethics," ScotthJTh 34 (1981):501.

2Croatto, Exodus, 12-30. Again, the influence of von Rad here is noticeable. According to the German scholar, "from first to last, Israel manifestly takes as her starting-point the absolute priority of event over 'logos'" (Old Testament Theology, p. 116).

Miranda, in an attempt to establish a non-covenantal concern for justice, insists that the theme of social justice for the poor marks the earliest pre-covenantal strata of the Old Testament. In this construction, Israel did not possess a consciousness of peoplehood before the Exodus. In fact, "Israel became a nation and people only after and through the Exodus, a long time after Abraham." The liberation of the slaves from Egypt, thus, was not according to "any ancient promise," but primarily a work of the imperative of liberty and justice, based solely on Yahweh's concern for the poor— which

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1 See Miranda, Marx and the Bible, pp. 88-106. In his exegesis of texts such Exod 2:11-20; Exod 3:7-9 and 9:27, attributed to the Yahwist tradition, Miranda focuses exclusively on the concern for justice shown by both God and Moses (pp. 89; 97-106).

2 John H. Yoder poses a cogent challenge to this assumption (see "Exodus and Exile: The Two Faces of Liberation," CrossCur 23 [1973]:297-309), stressing the elements in the narrative which seem to indicate that a people group existed before oppression began. We return to this later.

3 Croatto, Exodus, p. 15. For liberation theologians, God's covenant with Abraham was simply a retrojection of Israel's later belief (see below).

4 Ibid., pp. 15-16

5 According to Miranda, "the God who originally revealed himself to Israel was the God of the Exodus, and his self-revelation was simply obligatory intervention on behalf of the oppressed against their oppressors . . . It is the outcry of the oppressed (cf. Exod 3:7) that makes this God intervene to revolutionize history." Being the Messiah, p. 32; see also Assmann, Oppression-Liberacion, p. 21.

Elsewhere Miranda argues that "the exegesis which tries to make his [God's] intervention dependent completely on a promise or pact, as if God would not have intervened against injustice if he had not officially promised to do so beforehand, contradicts . . . the deepest and most radical conviction of the Old Testament authors" (Marx and the Bible, p. 86).
for Miranda is the basic datum of the Old Testament.¹

When this understanding of the Exodus is transposed to Latin America, the contemporary poor and oppressed become automatically the new people of God, those with whom God sides against the oppressor.² As an expression of the conviction that "God does not mediate between oppressors and oppressed, between Pharaoh and the chosen people," but that "he takes the side of the oppressed against the oppressor,"³ the Exodus becomes a kind of inspirational paradigm that informs and inspires the struggle of the oppressed, and gives justification for the ethical stance of the church joining the poor.

Moreover, within its underlying unitarian vision of history, liberation theology ties together liberation from Egypt with the act of Creation, both seen as "one salvific act."⁴ This notion, which

¹Ibid., pp. 109-137.

²Liberation theologians contend that the political nature of the liberation of the Israel from Egypt should be retained as a temporal historical reality, a reality that has meaning for Latin America today in the political release of the working class who is oppressed by the capitalistic oppressor (see Armerding, "Exodus: The Old Testament Foundation of Liberation," p. 58). McAfee Brown summarizes the manner in which liberation theologians apply the Exodus to the Latin American scene: (1) God is a God who takes sides, rather than remaining neutral and aloof; (2) God sides with the poor, the dispossessed, the slaves, rather than with the Pharaohs, the powerful, the influential people in society; (3) the poor and the dispossessed, therefore, can be confident that the alleviation of their misery is one of God's concerns; (4) what was true for the Israelites back then can become true for their modern counterparts today (Theology in a New Key, pp. 88-90).


⁴Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 155. Gutiérrez, on this point, reflects the general view of recent Old Testament studies, which
establishes a theological link between creation and liberation, when carried to its ultimate implications, devises a parallel and direct consequence of the calling of man to participate in the ongoing work of creation (cf. Gen 1:28), with the calling to participate in the liberation-salvation process which takes place in the natural and social world. Linked to and even coinciding with creation, the liberation from Egypt "adds an element of capital importance: the...


\(^1\) Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 157-160.

\(^2\) While the Exodus is for Gutiérrez the model of a human-centered political salvation, it is the doctrine of creation that, to some extent, provides him with the anthropological basis for man's role in his liberation (see Armerding, "Exodus," p. 49). "Man is the crown and center of the work of creation," Gutiérrez argues, "and is called to continue it through his labor" (A Theology, pp. 158-159; cf. Gen 1:28).
need and the place for man's active participation in the building of society."

Within this understanding, which leads to a perception of the Exodus essentially as a political act, the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt becomes primarily a programatic deliverance, with emphasis on the active involvement of the oppressed on their liberation. Similarly, like the Israelites of old, the oppressed today must be active in the overthrow of oppressors and of all structures that keep them in bondage. Mortimer Arias specifies that as the Exodus was not "programmed by the dominant social structure," the modern possibility of breaking with the past, the release of capitvity and oppression "demands [of the oppressed] decision, imagination, and action."

Liberation, thus, is accomplished by the

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1Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 158, 159. As the "desacralization" of nature in Genesis makes creation the area proper for the work of man, Gutiérrez insists that the "desacralization" of the political realm in the Exodus story makes political praxis his work (ibid., 159; cf. Cox, The Secular City, pp. 21-30).

2See Kirk, Liberation Theology, p. 97; Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 155-160. Croatto argues that the mediating cooperation of the man Moses in the creation of a new society in contrast to the servitude of Egypt shows the active part of man (Liberación y libertad, p. 42) The liberation from Egypt was "an interaction between Yahweh and the people themselves exercising their own initiative," John L. Topel, The Way to Peace: Liberation Through the Bible (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis, Books, 1979), p. 19. Hardly surprising, liberation theologians contend that if liberation is to be authentic and complete, it has to be undertaken by the poor and oppressed. For Gutiérrez, "this certainly is one of the most important themes running through the writings of the Latin American Church" (A Theology, p. 113). Dussel clearly assumes that "our people in Latin America must be active in liberating themselves, or else liberation will never come" (History and the Theology of Liberation, p. 146).

3Arias, The Cry of My People, p. 130. It should be kept in
efforts of the poor. For Gutiérrez "the future of history belongs to
the poor and exploited. True liberation will be the work of the
oppressed themselves; in them, the Lord saves history, the
spirituality of liberation will have at its basis the spirituality of
the anawim."^1 the poor of Yahweh.

The poor of Yahweh

Probably the strongest element found in the Exodus narrative,
which effectively speaks to the contemporary Latin American reality,
is the view that the Exodus fundamentally discloses that God is the
God of the oppressed, involved in their history and struggles for
liberation from bondage. "He is the God who liberates slaves
(Exodus), who causes empires to fall and raises up the oppressed."^2
Starting with the Exodus, understood as the foundational revelatory
event which infused all the subsequent Israelite theological
reflection with the notion that God is on the side of the poor,

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^1Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 208. In the words of the First
Commission of the Second International Convention of Christians for
Socialism, "the poor are the creators of both history and the Church"
(cited by Kloppenburg, The People's Church, p. 100).

^2Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 116. The influence of Moltmann's
thought is evident here (see The Crucified God, p. 329), however, as
indicated earlier, the fundamental difference is that for liberation
theologians, God's solidarity with the poor is understood in terms of
class option (see Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 147).
liberation theologians go on to explore the prolongation of this theme throughout the Old Testament.

Why is God on the side of the poor, as clearly depicted in the Old Testament? The answers given by traditional exegesis to this question have consistently over-emphasized the spiritual aspects of poverty to the extent that it was transformed into a positive value, or almost a human and religious ideal. Gutiérrez, then, finds it necessary to discuss the biblical meaning of poverty, "a notion which has received very little theological treatment and in spite of everything is still quite unclear."1 Thus, in an attempt to overcome semantic and existential ambiguities that traditionally have overshadowed the question, Gutiérrez devotes to it the last chapter of his A Theology of Liberation.2

Turning to the Old Testament, the Peruvian theologian finds that in Scripture itself, the concept of poor/poverty is ambivalent. The terms used to describe the poor, he argues, fall into two main categories: first, poverty as a "scandalous condition," and second, poverty as "spiritual childhood."3 In the first case, the Hebrew

1 Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 288.

2 See chapter 13, "Poverty: Solidarity and Protest," pp. 287-302. To some extent Gutiérrez' analysis reflects the influence of recent studies which have appeared particularly in connection with the emphasis in Roman Catholic circles on "a Church of the Poor" cf. Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 111; see the pioneer work of Albert Gelin, The Poor of Yahweh (Colleville: Minn: Liturgical Press, 1964). But his notion of a poverty of protest and effective solidarity with the poor is considered a rediscover of liberation theology (Berryman, "Latin American Liberation Theology," p. 389.

3 Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 288.
words for poor: rash, ἐβήγων, ἀλ,'ανί and 'αναω, describe a "scandalous condition inimical to human dignity,"¹ a situation which "contradicts the very meaning of the Mosaic religion."² On that basis, Gutiérrez strongly rejects any romantic notion of the poor. Material poverty—the lack of economic goods necessary for human life worthy of the name—cannot be, as traditionally conceived, a Christian ideal or a precondition to sanctity.³ Furthermore, any fatalistic attitude which regards material poverty as a "fate," or even as an accidental reality, must be opposed as an ultimate justification of what is to be rejected. Poverty in the Bible, he contends, is the result of "the injustice of the oppressors."⁴

¹Ibid., p. 291.
²Ibid., p. 294.
³Ibid., pp. 288, 289. Gutiérrez remarks that "Christians often have a tendency to give material poverty a positive value, considering it almost a human and religious ideal . . . a precondition for a life in conformity with the Gospel" (ibid., p. 289; also Míguez Bonino, "Poverty as Curse, Blessing and Challenge." pp. 3-13). In Roman Catholic tradition, "poverty," along with chastity and obedience, is one of the "evangelical counsels," thus, understood as an ideal, a dominical virtue. This notion prevailed in Catholic circles up to the time of Vatican II (see Luis Farré, "Ricos y Pobres en la Edad Media," in Los Pobres, pp. 87-105; cf. bibliography provided above, p. 62 n. 1). Furthermore, as we have indicated earlier, Rerum Novarum and papal pronouncements in this tradition saw social inequality as something natural if not necessary and good, a notion that tended to sacralize poverty (cf. above, p. 74, n. 2). Although The Vatican Council II marked an advancement towards a new understanding of the poor, it was not able to free itself completely from traditional ambiguities (see Míguez Bonino "Ecclesia Pauper," pp. 133-147).

⁴Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 292. "Poverty is not caused by fate," he insists. "There are poor because some people are victims of others" (pp. 292, 293). Gutiérrez and liberation theologians in general, have gone beyond the social encyclicals' classification of
very terminology used to express the degrading human situation of poor: "indigent," "weak," "bent over," "wretched," are not limited to description; they take a stand and insinuate a protest.  

Gutiérrez then goes on to discuss God's passionate concern for the poor, evident in the prophetic denunciation of injustice against the poor, as well as in the measures to prevent poverty in Israel.

Although the idea that God sides with poor is not new in theological thought, liberation theology adds to it a revolutionary element. When they affirm that "God is on the side of the poor," the theologians of liberation--strongly influenced by the concept of the society into rich and poor, ruler and ruled, employers and employees (see Rerum Novarum, 14), to the adoption of Marxist categories of oppressors and oppressed. Gutiérrez stresses that there is one characteristic in particular that holds a central place in liberation theology's perception of reality: "The division of humanity into oppressors and oppressed, into owners of the means of production and those dispossessed of the fruit of their work, into antagonistic social classes" (A Theology, p. 273; see also Eagleson, Christians and Socialism, pp. 164-169).

Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 292.

2Ibid., pp. 292-296; Barreiro, Basic Ecclesial Communities, pp. 14-23; Santa Ana, Good News to the Poor, pp. 1-11; Miranda, Marx and Bible, pp.35-88. Further developing this emphasis on justice for the poor, Miranda reduces the meaning of justice in the Old Testament, expressed by the terms mishpat and sedeqah to social justice, and equates it to an ethical defense of the oppressed (Marx and the Bible, pp. 77-199), or as he says, "doing justice to the poor, neither more nor less" (p. 127).

3Karl Barth had affirmed that "God always takes His stand unconditionally and passionately on this side [the side of the threatened innocent, the oppressed poor, widows, orphans and aliens] and on this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied and deprived of it" Church Dogmatics, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1957), 1:386. For Moltmann, also, God is the "God of the poor" (The Crucified God, p. 305).
poor mediated by Marxist class analysis—are not referring to an innocent solidarity which makes him "pity their situation." God's option for the poor is also framed within the vision of class struggle. To opt for the poor, the poor as "member of a social class which is exploited,"¹ is "to opt for one social class against another . . . it is to make common cause with its [the exploited class'] interests and struggles."² This notion is clear in Míguez Bonino's strong criticism of Moltmann's affirmation that God is the "God of the poor,"³ when the German scholar fails to see the poor as "a class and members of the oppressed societies."⁴ For Bonino, as for liberation theologians in general, "God does not mediate between oppressors and oppressed . . . he takes the side of the oppressed against the oppressors."⁵

Turning to the "second major line of thought" in his discussion of the poor and poverty, Gutiérrez focuses on poverty as


²Ibid.

³Moltmann, The Crucified God, p. 305.

⁴Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 148. Moltmann's declaration that "the crucified God is really a God without a country and without class," and at the same time "the God of the poor" is seen by Míguez Bonino as a contradiction, since "the poor, the oppressed, the humiliated, are a class and live in countries . . . Are we really for the poor and oppressed," he asks, "if we fail to see them as a class, as members of the oppressed societies" (Doing Theology, p.148; the emphasis is his; cf. Assmann, Practical Theology of Liberation, p. 94).

⁵Míguez Bonino, "Insisting on Essentials," p. 4.
"spiritual childhood." The poor person is the "client" of Yahweh. Here, the terms used to designate a sociological reality "received an ever more demanding and precise religious meaning." This is the case especially with the term anawim, which is the privileged designation of the spiritually poor. Poverty, from the time of Zephaniah on, acquired a spiritual meaning, "synonymous with faith, with abandonment and trust in the Lord." The "poor" are thus identified as the just ones, the whole ones, the faithful ones, those who are "totally at the disposition of the Lord."

To avoid the ambiguities of the traditional, "spiritualistic" approach to spiritual poverty, which regarded it as an "interior" attitude of unattachment to the goods of this world, a notion that

1Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 296-299.

2Ibid., p. 296; cf. Gelin, p. 26. Liaño in his study of the poor in the Old Testament, however, denies that there exists in the Bible an evolution of the concept of the poor, or an especialization of the terms used. "The word anaw, even though from the same root as 'ani, has a fundamentally spiritual meaning, not as poverty 'virtue,' but as humbleness, meekness and piety." Jesús María Liaño, "Los pobres en el Antiguo Testamento," EBib 25 (1966):161. We return to this question in the third chapter.

3A Theology, p. 296. Gutiérrez, then, goes on to provide some examples of spiritual poverty pp. 296-297.

4Ibid., p. 297.

5Ibid. Here Gutiérrez refers to the Matthean version of the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt 5:1), as the "highest expression" of spiritual poverty (ibid.).

6Ibid., p. 289. Philips discusses spiritual poverty in the context of Vatican II precisely in these terms (G. Philips. La Iglesia y su misterio en el Concilio Vaticano II (Barcelona: Herder, 1968), p. 153). Miguez Bonino criticizes him arguing that if, as Philips says, "el pobre es el que no tiene apego a su bienes, sino que
"in the long run leads to comforting and tranquiliizing conclusions"\(^1\) resulting in the justification of the status quo. Gutiérrez insists that spiritual poverty "has no direct relationship to wealth . . . [it is] something more complete and profound. It is above all total availability to the Lord.\(^2\)

The full development of Gutiérrez' analysis of the poor and poverty, however, does not emerge until the concluding section of his discussion: "An Attempt at Synthesis\(^3\) where he arrives at a third meaning of poverty: "poverty as solidarity and protest." Here, first of all, he reaches the conclusion of his discussion of poverty as "a scandalous condition." Gutiérrez makes clear that there is no room

\[\text{Cuál está dispuesto a desprenderse de ellos,} \text{ then only the rich can be}
\text{"poor in spirit, since the poor do not have material goods to be}
\text{detached from" ("Ecclesia Pauper," p. 140; the translation is mine).}

\(^1\)Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 289. He strongly reacts against the abstract notions which have surrounded the concept of "spiritual poverty," giving to the rich the convenient idea of "interior attitude" and escape from the necessity of an incarnated testimony of material poverty (ibid., p. 290). On that basis Gutiérrez also challenges the standard Catholic view of "evangelical poverty," which affirms a "counsel" appropriate to a particular vocation and not a "precept" obligatory for all Christians (ibid).

\(^2\)Ibid., pp. 297, 299. It is significant to note that while this criterion is applied to the rich, it does not apply to the poor. On the basis of relationship to wealth (i.e. detachment from it), the rich cannot assume "spiritual poverty," since this kind of poverty demands "total availability to the Lord." Strangely, however, it is precisely this relation to wealth, negatively in this case, that makes the materially poor automatically poor in spirit. Dussel, for example affirms that "those who are materially poor are the poor in spirit" ("The Kingdom of God and the Poor," p. 116), a notion that stresses liberation tendency to exalt the poor.

\(^3\)A Theology, pp. 299-300.
for any idealization of material poverty. This would be: (1) to aspire to a degrading condition, (2) to move against the current of history, (3) to oppose man's capacity to change reality, and (4) to obscure and ultimately justify the real causes of poverty, i.e., injustice and exploitation.\(^1\) Then he moves to new understanding of "Christian poverty," posing a decisive objection to any spiritualistic understanding of the concept. Quoting Christological texts referring to Jesus' incarnation in poverty, he discusses poverty as an act of love and liberation, marked by redemptive value. "Christian poverty has meaning only as a commitment of solidarity with the poor, with those who suffer misery and injustice."\(^2\) This view of Christian or spiritual poverty, of course, radically departs from the classic passive "renunciation of the goods of this world."

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 299.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 300. Gutiérrez refers to Phil 2:6-11; 2 Cor 8:9; Gal 5:1; Rom 6:1-11. He quotes here the famous text of Lumen Gentium; "Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and under oppression, so the Church is called to follow the same path in communicating to men the fruits of salvation" (Lumen Gentium no. 8, Abbott, p. 23). However, while Catholic First World theologians, commenting on this passage, understand a "poor church" as a church that abandons "triumphalism" and renounces being domina and accepts, as its Lord, to be ancilla (Congar, Power and Poverty in the Church, pp. 80-100; Philips, La Iglesia y su misterio en el Concilio Vaticano II, pp. 151-155), liberation theologians give flesh and bones to the concept of Christian solidarity with the poor. One cannot be with the poor unless struggling against poverty (Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 300; Miranda, Marx and the Bible, p. 47). Not surprisingly, texts such as 2 Cor 8:9 ("though he was rich . . . became poor"), Phil 2:6-7 ("he emptied himself . . . taking the very nature of a servant"), are not treated in relation to their Christological dimensions, but nearly exclusively in historical terms of Jesus' literal identification with the poor.
It must be expressed in positive action, meaningful for contemporary situation. It seems clear that in Gutiérrez's mind this form of poverty must also be incarnated in class option, "a break with one's social class," in favor of the class of the poor.

From Gutiérrez' discussion on the poor and poverty, it becomes evident that he has encompassed the concept completely within the perspective of liberation. The materially poor, the victims of oppression, on the one hand, are the members of the proletariat struggling for their basic rights. The "spiritually poor," on the other hand, are those who, although not in the same condition of the first group, choose to side with them through active involvement in the process of liberation. These are the 'liberators,' in a particular sense all gathered together into the "church of the people."

Jesus the Messiah of the Poor

Liberation theologians affirm that God is hidden in the midst of history in solidarity with poor. He is hidden precisely in the measure in which he is present with the poor, the humiliated and marginalized of history. The creed of the poor, thus, is not to affirm that God exists, but to proclaim that he walks with them and

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1Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 300. Gutiérrez seems to suggest that even non-Christians siding with the oppressed in their struggle are included among those who in contemporary Latin America are living "Christian poverty" in this new and "authentic way" (ibid., p. 301).

2See Araya, El Dios de las Pobres, pp. 91-93, for a synthesis of this notion in the thought of the main liberation theologians.
For Gutierrez, the relationship God/poor is the heart of the biblical faith. The liberating God who manifests himself in history "is a God who is partisan to the poor and who liberates them from slavery and oppression." In the New Testament, the mystery of the Deus Absconditus in the poor is revealed in Jesus Christ, who is precisely "God become poor." Jesus' life and message entailed an inescapable preference for the poor. This "preferential option," however, as Gutierrez states it, is marked by a conflictive character and apparently bears the notion of class struggle: "He [Jesus] addressed his gospel by preference to poor. He lashed out with invective against the rich who oppressed the poor and despised them." Liberation theologians also call attention to how the New Testament...
Testament message—as that of the Old—is about deliverance from bondage, not simply a bondage and deliverance of the spirit divorced from the external bondages of social life. The Christ-event extends the good news of the Exodus and prophetic tradition, giving new dimensions to the meaning of liberation. The actions, words, and life of Jesus Christ liberate human beings oppressed by social and religious structures.

As noted earlier, traditional Latin American "Christology of resignation"\(^1\) reduced the life of Jesus to an icon, with little human context, mostly placed outside history and hardly related to the modern forces at play. This vision of Christ, adopted by the poor and oppressed, became an alienating influence, often useful for preserving the status quo. Thus, in their effort to replace the "dead Christ" of the Latin American popular piety, liberation theologians attempt to recover the political dimensions of the historical Jesus through the formulation of a set of Christologies "from below."\(^2\) In

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\(^1\)See above, pp. 64-65.

\(^2\)The two most significant attempts to work out a Christology from a liberationist perspective come from Leonardo Boff, Jesus Christ Liberator, and Jon Sobrino, Christology at the Crossroads. Their intention is to elaborate a Christology from the standpoint of Latin America. According to Boff, it is not enough simply to read about the figure of Jesus purely in the light of his ipsissima vox et facta. "A Christology that proclaims Jesus Christ as the Liberator seeks to be committed to the economic, social, and political liberation of those groups that are oppressed and dominated" (Jesus Christ, p. 266; cf. p. 293; also Boff, "Salvation in Jesus Christ and the Process of Liberation," Conc [June 1974]:78-97). Robert Kress ("Theological Method: Praxis and Liberation," Com 6 [1979]:131), and Michael L. Cook ("Jesus from the Other Side of History: Christology in Latin America," ThSt 44 [1983]:167-270) criticize Boff and Sobrino's Christologies for their heavy dependence on European
this approach priority is given to the Jesus of history since he, not
the Christ of faith, speaks to the contemporary situation. Liberation
Christology, therefore, does not start with the dogma of the
incarnation, neither does it begin with the kerygma of Jesus, as in
Bultmannian existentialism, or with the teaching of Jesus, as in
liberal moralism. It focuses on the praxis of the historical Jesus,
fundamentally marked by his preferential option for the poor.¹

Although liberation theology, contrary to a general impres-
sion, does not identify Jesus as a Zealot,² it radically rejects the

Christology, despite the claim of "indigenousness." Kress and Cook
also underline the difficulties of their heavy emphasis on the
historical Jesus. Boff, however, in a revealing statement remarks
that "the predominantly foreign literature that we cite ought not to
delude anyone. It is with preoccupations that are ours alone, taken
from our Latin American context, that we will reread not only the old
texts of the New Testament but also the most recent commentaries
written in Europe" (ibid., p. 43). See also the recently published
Faces of Jesus, Latin American Christologies, ed. Miguez Bonino
(Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984), a selection of essays written
by some of the best known liberation theologians.

¹Ruether, Disputed Questions, p. 93; Sobrino, Christology at
the Crossroads, pp. xxi, xxiii; L. Boff, Jesus Christ Liberator, p.
T57. Not surprisingly, the emphasis--placed on the existential
meaning of Jesus--remains functional. "Liberation theology is
concentrated in Christology insofar as it reflects on Jesus himself
as the way to liberation" (L. Boff, Jesus Christ Liberator, p. 37).

²Gutiérrez not only notes the differences between Jesus and
the Zealots but also gives them a significant emphasis in his inter-
pretation of Jesus. See "Jesus and the Political World," WView 15
(1972):43-46; also A Theology, pp. 225-232. For a brief synthesis
see Francis Fiorenza, "Latin American Liberation Theology," pp 8-9.
Miranda, however, apparently, holds a more radical position. See
70-72. L. Boff affirms that Jesus renounced the political messianism
of the Zealots and their confidence in the use of force, though "his
preaching and his outlook brought him close to the liberation project
of the Zealots" (Jesus Christ Liberator, p. 289). The lengthy
treatment of Segundo on violence, on the other hand, places too much

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traditional understanding which seeks in good faith but uncritically to cleanse him from anything which can give even an inkling of a political attitude on his part. For Gutiérrez, the revolution envisioned by Jesus was "on a deeper level"¹ and of more far-reaching import than that of the Zealots. Following the idea of social criticism taken from the thought of Metz, the Peruvian theologian affirms that Christ rejected all existing political systems for the sake of a more free society. Since social criticism can only truly effect freedom on a worldwide level, "for Jesus, the liberation of the Jewish people was only one aspect of a universal, permanent revolution."²

Gutiérrez criticizes Cullmann's conclusion that Jesus' eschatological realism and expectation of an imminent end of history meant that he was concerned solely with the conversion of the individual and not with the transformation of social structures.³ Segundo, in emphasis on the whip in the hand of Jesus at the Temple. His designation of God's love in action as "the gospel of violence" leaves too many frightening possibilities unblocked (The Liberation of Theology, pp. 156-165).

¹Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 231.
²Ibid.
³Gutiérrez, "Jesus and the Political World," pp. 44, 45. Cullmann's, posits a dichotomy between Jesus' call to conversion and any social reform program (Jesus and the Revolutionaries [New York: Harper and Row, 1970], p. 27; Cullmann, The State in the New Testament [New York: Scribner's, 1956], p. 18; see also M. Hengel Victory over Violence [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973], pp. 47-51). As for personal conversion, which seems so much a part of the teachings of Jesus, Gutiérrez sees this as too fundamentally ordered to the realization of the kingdom in the social order. It seems that for liberation theology, all personal conversions, all personal free acts
his customary provocative way, gives a more elaborated dimension to
Jesus' political attitude. He remarks that the alleged apolitical
stance of Jesus is based on a mistaken exegesis, which localizes the
"political element" of his period in the structures of the Roman
Empire because they are what most resemble a modern political empire.

The fact is overlooked that, at that time, the political
life, the civic organization of the Jewish multitudes, their
burdens, their oppression, their differing social and cultural situation, depended much less on the Roman Empire, and
much more on the theology ruling in the groups of scribes
and pharisees. They, and not the Empire, imposed intolerable burdens on the weak and dispensed themselves from them,
so establishing the true socio-political structures of Israel.

From this perspective, the real locus of Jesus' political
stance is found in his counter-theology rather than in his
pronouncements or acts against the Roman Empire. For liberation
theologians, thus, Jesus' political posture is framed within a strong
challenge to the groups in power, accompanied with a "head-on
opposition to the rich and powerful and a radical option for the
poor... it is above all for them that the Son of Man has come."2

are dependent on the reform of the social structures of society. The
political liberation of man thus becomes the means by which the
eternal life of the transcendent future is brought forth. All forms
of liberation are concomitant with each other (see Gutiérrez, A
Theology, p. 235).

1Segundo, "Capitalism--Socialism: A Theological Crux," p. 118. For Miranda "the thesis that the message of Jesus does not get
involved in politics is simply outrageous. It implies a complete
misunderstanding of the prophets and a complete misunderstanding of
Christ's intransigent condemnation of the rich" (Communism in the

2Gutiérrez, "Jesus and the Political World," p. 44.
Significantly, as depicted by liberation theologians, the moral interests of God are exclusively identified with one group of persons in society. Christ's kenosis and incarnation, his ministry, teachings, and death, cannot be understood apart from his political identification with the poor. Jesus is, in fact, the "Messiah of the poor" and everything about his words and deeds, therefore, must be interpreted in this light. As Sobrino declares,

Jesus se ha encarnado no en cualquier mundo, sino en el mundo de los pobres, ha tomado no cualquier carne, sino la carne débil y frágil, ha defendido no cualquier causa, sino la causa de los pobres, ha corrido no cualquier suerte, sino la suerte de los pobres.

Because of Luke's interest in "the poor" and the centrality he gives to them in his gospel, liberation theologians are particularly attracted by the third evangelist. The last pages of this chapter give a brief analysis of the crucial Lukan texts used by the Latin America theologians of liberation to underscore the Church's engagement in the struggle to bring justice for the poor. Generally limited to giving essential attention to themes, liberation theology does not deal with these texts from a exegetical perspective. While these passages generally provide the New Testament seal of approval for the over-all thesis of God siding with the poor, thematically they can be classified into two groups: on the one hand,

1See Alvaro Barreiro, Basic Ecclesial Communities, pp. 24.

Luke 4:18-21\(^1\) and 7:22 are taken as the support of liberation theology's assumption that the sociologically poor are the privileged beneficiaries of the Gospel and their evangelization/liberation is the first priority of the agenda of the church. On the other hand, Luke 1:48-55 and 6:20 seem to underscore the vision of the poor as the avant-garde, the subjects of the liberation process. Needless to say here that for liberation theologians, the poor--ptochoi--in the Gospel of Luke refers exclusively to the economically deprived.\(^2\)

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\(^1\)Luke 4:18-21 is considered the "most important Scripture reference for the theology of liberation" (David J. Bosch, "The Church and the Liberation of Peoples," Missionalia 5 [1975]:31), or "the most frequently noted passage in liberation writings," Steven Phillips, The Use of Scripture in Liberation Theologies [Ph.D. dissertation: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1978], p. 156). David R. Griffin even holds that Luke 4:18 is regarded as "the John 3:16 of liberation theology." "North Atlantic and Latin American Liberation Theology," Encount 40 (1979):21. Gutiérrez quotes this passage, without exception, in the context of his political notion of the poor and their liberation (see The Power of the Poor, pp. 14, 19, 143; 157; 207; A Theology, pp. 168). Not surprisingly, McAfee Brown states that "if the story of the exodus is a paradigm for the Old Testament conviction that God takes sides, the story of Jesus' sermon in Nazareth . . . is paradigm for the New Testament conviction that God brings liberty to the oppressed" (Theology in a New Key, p. 94).

\(^2\)Gutiérrez, as we have indicated, admits that the term "poor" can have a spiritual understanding (above, p. 226), but he dismisses this meaning in the gospel of Luke. Indeed, "it is impossible to avoid the concrete and 'material' meaning which the term "poor" has for this evangelist. It refers first of all to those who live in a social situation characterized by a lack of the goods of this world and even by misery and indigence" (A Theology, p. 298). Commenting this affirmation in a footnote, Gutiérrez further clarifies that the term ptochos, which occurs in Luke ten times, refers to the materially poor (p. 305, n. 42). Significantly, Gutiérrez gives to these ten references the same meaning, without considering the contextual differences, particularly in those cases where the use of the word is directly dependent on the Old Testament and suggests a more complex understanding. We return to this later.
The Gospel for the Poor

As Gort has observed, under the influence of liberation theology, the expression "Gospel for the poor" has gained the status of standard Christian coinage in recent years. "To not a few," Gort notes, "it has become clear on the basis of the biblical witness that the materially poor are in a special way the apple of God's eye and that this obliges his people to engage in a special ministry on behalf of the poor."^ Furthermore, there is a growing theological conviction of the fundamental role of the poor in God's kingdom^2 and that their struggle is a basic "concern of God's mission and thus profoundly affects the identity of the church."^3

The poor, it is asserted, are God's favorites. They are the first ones to whom Jesus mission is directed (Luke 4:18-21).^4


Their evangelization is the supreme sign and proof of his mission (7:21-23). Therefore, if God through his prophet Jesus acts in history by "preaching good news to the poor," liberation of the captives, the setting at liberty of those who are oppressed, it is hardly surprising that liberation theology sees itself as well as its notion of the mission of the church directly grounded in the mission of Jesus. "Was not Christ's first preaching to 'proclaim the liberation of the oppressed?'" Gutiérrez asks rhetorically. Jesus--we are told time and again--addressed his gospel by preference to the poor, and strategically had them as the horizon of his evangelizing mission which was placed in the perspective of liberation. What does

1See Gutiérrez, "The Poor in the Church," p. 15. Elsewhere he remarks that "the gospel preached to the poor" is the sign of the arrival of the kingdom (The Power of the Poor, pp. 207-208), and identifies Jesus as the Messiah (We Drink from Our Own Wells, p. 43). Miranda, discussing the same text, goes one step further, affirming that "Jesus is the Messiah to the extent that he is the savior of all the poor and the liberator of all oppressed." Being and the Messiah. The Message of St. John (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1977), p. 56.

2See R. Ruether, Disputed Questions, p. 91. L. Boff insists that Jesus preached a God to whom men had access not primarily through prayer and religious observance, but through service to the poor, in whom God lies hidden and anonymous. Jesus established fellowship with society's outcast (Matt 11:19). He rejected wealth (Luke 19:9) and domintative power (Luke 22:25-28, Jesus Christ Liberator, pp. 100-120). His own praxis, in other words, established a new way of looking at God and at reality, i.e., through the prism of the struggle for liberation (see McBrien's evaluation of Boff's Christology, Catholicism, pp. 491-492)

3Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 116.

4Gutiérrez, The Power of the Poor, pp. 13-14. For Julio de Santana, Luke 4:18 emphasizes "what we might call the privilege of the poor" (Good News to the Poor, p. 13). Miranda criticizes Pueblo's notion of "God's preferential option for the poor" since it gives "the impression that it was some arbitrary decision of God or the
this mean? First of all, liberation theologians are extremely perceptive of the convergence between the gospel and the poor. These two ideas, as Dussel insists, are inseparable and become central to the present opportunity of the Latin American Church. Furthermore, Jesus' preferential option for the poor determines that the church's "strategic, real priority option must be for the poor... it must first give attention to the poor." On this basis, the church must

Bible, which could be omitted without imputation of culpability." According to him this option "is not an option, it is an obligation... Even God is under obligation in this matter" (Communism in the Bible, p. 69)

1Dussel "An International Division of Theological Labor," p. 332. Referring to Luke 4:18-21, Dussel remarks that "in these texts which are basic for all future evangelization, the expression 'poor' has a very precise, unavoidable, meaning. 'Poor' are 'captives', 'blind' 'oppressed' (p. 334). In this context, referring to the criticism by the conservative Bishop Lopez Trujillo regarding the identification of the poor of the gospel with the proletariat (Liberation or Revolution, pp. 18-20), Dussel admits that the "poor" in biblical sense cannot simply be identified with the proletarian class (" An International Division" p. 334), although, he insists elsewhere, the former possesses many of the characteristics of the latter (A History of the Church p. 9). Liberation theologians, however, prefer to run the risk of this identification rather than making a "worse confusion," i.e., to identify the "poor with those who have power and form socially a part of the dominant class" ("An International Division," p. 334), as traditional allegorization has done with the notion of the "poor in spirit" (ibid.).

2Ibid., p. 335. That the poor become the reference point for the mission of the church is indicated by Dussel in the same context. It is only from the perspective of the poor, he adds, that it is possible "to labor for the salvation, the evangelization of the rich, the powerful, the dominators, the sinners" (ibid). Liberation theologians believe that the liberation of the rich will occur simultaneously to the liberation of the poor (Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 122; Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 285 n. 56). Is it not, however, a boundless optimism to assume that the rich will be freed from selfishness and inclination to oppress once the poor are socio-economically liberated?
"evangelize in terms of God's proclaimed preference for the poor and the oppressed."\(^1\) Moreover, because its message is addressed to the poor, the church's mission consists in making liberation a reality.\(^2\)

Here, however, one can easily miss the innovative dimension of this emphasis. Concerned with demonstrating that the proper understanding and value of the gospel is not so much on transcendence as on a specific and highly visible function, namely, what it can do in this world and for the world problems, liberation theologians give to Luke 4:18-21 and 7:21-23 a radical interpretation. Since the ptochoi have already been identified as fundamentally the deprived classes, a sociological category,\(^3\) the emphasis unavoidably falls on the political implications of the gospel and evangelization.\(^4\)

\(^1\) Gutiérrez, "The Irruption of the Poor," p. 117.

\(^2\) Sobrino, The True Church, p. 120.

\(^3\) See Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 305, n. 42; Dussel, "An International Division," p. 334. McAfee Brown, after a brief analysis of Gutiérrez' use of the concept of class struggle, quotes Luke 4:1; then, adding emphasis to the biblical words "good news to the poor," "release to the captives" and "to set at liberty those who are oppressed," calls attention to the "convergence between [Marxist] analysis and the 'good news of the Gospel.' At this point," concludes the powerful evangelical theologian, champion of liberation theology, "the message of Marx and the message of the gospel are strikingly similar" (Gustavo Gutiérrez, p. 37). This view, however, is basically misleading not in what it says, but in what is left unsaid and leads to a minimization of the gospel and the liberation it offers.

\(^4\) Gutiérrez, quoting Luke 4:16-21, affirms that Jesus here is "proclaiming a kingdom of justice and liberation, to be established in favor of the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized of history . . . This proclamation of the kingdom, this struggle for justice, leads Jesus to the cross" (The Power of the Poor, pp. 13-14). Although Gutiérrez does not deny the transcendent dimensions of salvation and the Gospel, he does not deal adequately with them. The
surprisingly, there is in liberation theology a tendency to limit the content of the "good news" to the emancipation of the proletariat from political and economic oppression.\textsuperscript{1} Liberation theologians consciously and explicitly accept the relationship between the notion of the "Gospel for the poor" and political revolution. Politics and social praxis have become the place where the Christian faith must be expressed. In fact, reading the theologians of liberation one gets the impression that there is for the Church just one authentic way of living up to the demands of its evangelizing mission, namely, committing itself in pragmatic and realistic way to the struggles impression is often given that the Gospel is essentially a blueprint of political liberation.

\textsuperscript{1}In his A History of the Church in Latin America, referring to Luke 4:18 and Isa 61:1, Dussel argues that Jesus "is dedicated to subvert the system, to redirect history, and to liberate the poor" (p. 10). Miranda's references to the Nazareth discourse also place exclusive emphasis on the existential, immanent and horizontal dimensions of the good news (Being and the Messiah, pp. 56, 169). Salvation "has a material, this worldly-sense" (p. 189), and the good news that the kingdom has arrived means that "we must make it arrive" (ibid). Outside of this vision, he insists elsewhere "the word evangelion makes absolutely no sense" (Marx and the Bible, p. 246). Drawing upon Luke 4:17, he points out that anyone who really confesses that Jesus is the Messiah is declaring a supreme concern for a worldwide order of love and justice, for "Jesus Christ is the Messiah to the extent that he is the savior of all the poor and the liberator of all the oppressed" (Being and the Messiah, p. 56; cf. pp. 156-171). To fail to bring justice to the poor is not only not to believe that the messianic eschaton has arrived, but a denial that Jesus is the Messiah (p. 196; cf. Shaul, Heralds of a New Reformation, pp. 44-45). For Miranda, as for Marx, "our world is not past recovery" (Marx and the Bible, pp. 216-217). What for Marx is possible through a conscious understanding of history as dialectic, according to Miranda, it seems, is possible for the Christian through faith which acts on the assumption that the new age is already here. Miranda, however, fails to recognize the eschatological reserve, the "not yet" of the coming kingdom (Coon, "Theologies of Liberation," p. 417; P. Hebblethwaite, "Marx and the Bible," RelComLands 5 [1977]:257).
of the poor. By the same token, the good news of liberation is aimed near-exclusively at the structural problems of injustice and poverty.

The Poor: The Subject of the Gospel

While traditionally the poor have been considered the "object" of the Church's action, liberation theologians attempt to reverse this emphasis, transforming them into the subject of the Church, the Gospel and history. For liberation theologians, the poor "are not just the privileged addressees of the gospel message. They are its bearers."¹ This notion to some extent is underscored by liberationist interpretation of the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) and the Lukan version of the beatitudes (Luke 6:20).²

These passages are taken as speaking directly to the Latin American concerns. For liberation theologians the theme of political reversal present in the Magnificat makes it "one of the Bible's most

¹Gutiérrez, "The Irruption of the Poor," p. 120; Barreiro, Basic Ecclesial Communities, p. 25.
²While liberation theologians tend to concentrate on Luke's shorter reading—"blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God," the Matthean rendition "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"—(Matt 5:3), is hardly mentioned. David L. Mealand notes Gutiérrez' selective concentration on Luke's beatitude. Poverty and Expectation in the Gospels (London: SPCK, 1981), p. 95. This, however, can be understood as a corrective to traditional emphasis on the Matthean form (see L. J. Topel, "The Lukan Version of the Lord's Sermon," BibTheBull 11 [1981]:48-53). The basic dilemma in choosing one of the two forms, as Léon-Defour well puts it, lies in the fact that if the exegete "selects only Luke, he tends to beatify a sociological condition; if he selects only Matthew, he runs the risk of having the Beatitude evaporate into a spirit of poverty, which the rich are supposed to possess." L' exégète et l'événement historique," RechScRei 58 [1979]:559. Gutiérrez, however, has proposed an innovative interpretation of the Lukan beatitude precisely to avoid the canonization of the poor. See below.
revolutionary or radical passages,"¹ and a "favorite element in the life and reflection of Christians committed to the process of liberation in Latin America."² The notion of God associated with the oppressed and in opposition to the oppressors finds a decisive confirmation in the theme of reversal announced by Mary's song contrasting the different fates of the proud/mighty/rich and the lowly/hungry (Luke 1:52-53). The Magnificat, thus, becomes a sort of revolutionary hymn, "one of the New Testament texts which contain great implications both as regards liberation and the political sphere."³ In the context of this affirmation, Gutiérrez goes on to declare that "the future of history belongs to the poor and exploited. True liberation will be the work of the oppressed themselves; in them, the Lord saves history."⁴ Although there are Christian overtones in this vision, Marx's dialectic of history

¹Gutiérrez, The Power of the Poor, p. 139; cf. Leonardo Boff, "Maria, Mulher Profética e Líberadora," ReEcBr 149 (1978):58-76; Gutiérrez A Theology, pp. 207-208. For the Bishop Sergio Méndez Arceo, "Mary sang this song that is now the song of the people, of the Christian people, and especially the people gathered in the Christian basic communities" ("Maria expresion suprema de lo feminino," cf. Gutiérrez, We Drink From our Own Wells, p. 170, n. 11).

²Miranda, Being and the Messiah, chap 5. In 1976, the Conference of Colombian Bishops verified that the Magnificat had been transformed into a revolutionary message that finds its best meaning in the heroism of the martyrs of the new faith: the Latin American guerrilla fighters. Identidad cristiana en la acción por la justicia (Bogotá: CEDIAL, 1975), p. 142; cf. Virgilio Elizondo, "Notre-Dame de Guadalupe symbole culturel" in Concilium 122 (1977):33.

³Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 207-208.

⁴Ibid. p. 208. Marxist proletarian messianism seems to underline Gutiérrez' construction. Referring to the interpretation of Mary's song by the South-American liberationists, Edouard Hamel
with the final triumph of the proletariat, seems to undergird Gutiérrez' thought.

Miranda, in his realistic treatment of the eschaton, regards Luke 1:52-53 as a "programatic battle-cry" and a summary of the kingdom which prophesies the universal overthrow of "every class of rulers." For the Mexican theologian, the kingdom announced by the Magnificat, which "seeks to 'tear down the rulers from their thrones and lift up the poor . . . not only implies, but is a political transformation of the broadest reach." In their ideological convictions, liberation theologians, despite stylistic and different

Edouard Hamel observes that "prise à la lettre, la péricope du Magnificat semble envisager une révolution catastrophique dans laquelle les prolétaires remporteron un succès éclatant aux dépends de la classe privilégiée" ("Le Magnificat et le renversement des situations," Greg 60 [1979]:73).

Miranda, Marx and the Bible, p. 17. In this context Miranda, while discussing "private ownership under challenge," singles out vs. 53 ("he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty") as an expression of the biblical "conviction about the injustice of differentiating wealth" (pp. 17-18). In the same vein, Elza Tamez affirms that in vss. 52-53, "Mary is speaking . . . of the restructuring of the order in which there are rich and, poor, mighty and lowly" (The Bible of the Oppressed [Maryknol, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1982], p. 58).

Miranda, Communism in the Bible, p. 72, Miranda argues that it was precisely this vision of the kingdom that caused the persecution of the first three centuries, unleashed "by the Lords of this world," which, eventually, constrained Christians to formulate a version of Christianity in a way that would no longer provoke repression (p. 68). The notion of the kingdom of God which does not call into question the kingdoms and social systems of this world, he argues, emerged not because theologians were pining and sighing for the other world, but out of fear that "the poor would fight them for this world" (Ibid., p. 66, emphasis supplied).

Ibid., pp. 67-68.
degrees of emphasis, demonstrate an important confluence of thought
in their references to the Magnificat. In the light of Latin American
struggles, the text gives validation to the uprising of the poor, and
symbolical force to the intended subversion of the present order.¹
For Gutiérrez, "The Magnificat . . . gives profound expression to
what the practice of Latin American Christians is bringing to light
once again in our day."²

The notion of the poor as active subject of the changes to be
brought about in society is also supported by liberation theologians'
understanding of the Lukan version of the beatitude: "Blessed are you
who are poor." Gutiérrez devotes three pages to assess the different
approaches to this text.³ He dismisses those interpretations tending
to: (1) spiritualize the poor;⁴ (2) canonize their situation;⁵

¹A Document signed by eighteen bishops of the Third World
points out that Christians should recognize the hand of the Almighty
in those historical events "when the powerful are dethroned and the
lowly exalted, when the rich are sent away empty-handed and the needy
are filled." "Letter to Peoples of the Third World," Between Honesty
and Hope, p. 6. In fact, in the context of his discussion of the
Magnificat, Dussel observes that the subversion of the rulers of the
present system in Latin America and the liberation of the poor are
"for the church the 'sign' of the eschatological mission of the
kingdom" (The History of the Church, p. 11).

²Gutiérrez, We Drink from Our Own Wells, p. 127.

³Idem, A Theology, pp. 297-299.

⁴Ibid., p. 298. This has been done mainly by interpreting Luke
6:20 from the perspective of Matthew 5:3. In this case, Luke's
version is assimilated into Matthew's and both are referring to
spiritual poverty, or openness to God.

⁵This has been generally the result of a simplistic identifi-
Gutiérrez avoids this danger suggesting an innovative view (see below).
transform poverty "into a privileged path towards poverty of soul." Furthermore, Gutiérrez rejects also the traditional poor-now/rich-later approach, which retains the dichotomy between extraterrestrial salvation and present existence and reduces Luke's message to a preaching of resignation, which in the end, results in sacralizing misery and injustice.

For Gutiérrez, it is impossible to avoid the concrete and material meaning that the term "poor" has for Luke. "The text [6:20] in Luke," he affirms "uses the term poor in the tradition of the first major line of thought we have studied: poverty is an evil and therefore incompatible with the kingdom of God." But, why are the

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1 Gelin, The Poor of Yahweh, p. 108; cf. Karel Truhlar, "The Earthy Cast of the Beatitudes," In The Gift of Joy, ed. Christian Doquod (New York: Paulist Press, 1968), pp. 33-34. For Gelin, the poor are proclaimed blessed not because of their socio-economic status, but because of their "internal spiritual inclination" (ibid.). Liberation theologians, however, criticize Gelin's "spiritualizing and moralizing interpretation" (Barreiro, Basic Ecclesial Communities, p. 27; Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 305, n. 41; Julio de Santa Ana, Good News to the Poor, p. 15). The basic reason for the criticism is that Gelin's notion stands only a short distance from the acceptance of poverty as a norm, and in this case, poverty would be a virtue, rather than an evil to be eradicated, an understanding which clearly waters down the need for liberation. Significantly, however, in many other circumstances, when this danger seems removed, liberation theologians affirm precisely what they criticize, and tend to depict a "romantic" picture of the poor.

2 Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 298. For J. Dupont, "in the Beatitudes of Luke, the basic perspective ... is that of retribution after death." Les beatitudes: le problème littéraire, le message doctrinal (Bruges: éditions de l'Abbaye de Saint-André, 1954), pp. 213-218. It seems that in more recent editions of his Les beatitudes Dupont has revised this position.

3 Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 298; Santa Ana, Good News to the Poor, pp. 16-17.
poor blessed? Here liberation theologians depart from standard interpretations and introduce an innovative view. The meaning of Jesus' proclamation of their happiness is disclosed by liberation theology's notion of the kingdom, understood as taking place in history. For Gutiérrez, "If we believe that . . . the kingdom of God necessarily implies the reestablishment of justice in this world, then we must believe that Christ says that the poor are blessed because the kingdom of God has begun."¹ Thus, their privilege lies neither in their material circumstances, nor in their spiritual disposition, but in the arrival of the messianic kingdom, which means the arrival of complete justice and liberation. They are blessed because the kingdom at hand will bring a reversal and "put an end to their poverty

¹Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 298. Dupont ("Les pauvres et la pauvreté dans les Évangiles et les Actes," in La pauvreté evangélique [Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1971], p. 52), as well as R. Bultmann (Jesus and the Word [New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1934], p. 103), emphasize that the poor were pronounced blessed not because of their condition but because the kingdom of God would end that need, reversing their plight in the age to come (cf. S. Maclean Gilmour, "The Gospel according to St. Luke: Introduction to an Exegesis" in The Interpreters' Bible, ed. George Arthur Buttrick [New York: Abingdon Press, 1972], 8:118). For R. Bultmann, however, in Luke 6:20 "poor" is equivalent with "pious" (Theology of the New Testament 2 vols. [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955], 1:39). Gutiérrez fights against this notion. For him, the poor are blessed independently of their spiritual dispositions (The Power of the Poor, p. 138). The theology of the Beatitudes, he insists, must come before their anthropology, therefore, "the blessedness of the poor is constituted by the fact that the God of the Bible is a God of justice, and hence a God of the poor" (p. 141). In their politicization of the kingdom, liberation theologians affirm that the kingdom that will reverse the plight of the poor, grows from within history. It is fashioned particularly by the efforts of the poor (Dussel, History and the Theology of Liberation, p. 170; Dussel, "The Kingdom of God and the Poor," pp. 124-125; Miranda, Communism in the Bible, pp. 12-20; 65-67; Marx and the Bible, pp. 250ff; L. Boff, Jesus Christ Liberator, pp. 56, 57).
by creating a world of brotherhood."¹ How precisely it takes place is not clearly spelled out, but the clue seems to lie in liberationist eschatology.

Croatto, for example, remarks that "blessed are the poor" because now with Jesus liberation begins. The beatitudes, then, "are not a call to resignation but to a process of liberation: the process does not begin as a social and political revolution, but sooner or later becomes one. If the 'kingdom' is not an ethereal, spiritual reality, then it will not arrive without a profound change in human beings, without the establishment of justice on all levels."² Since the poor of the Gospel are transformed into the working class or the proletariat, and action to promote the coming of the kingdom of God is at least fragmentarily identified with revolutionary struggle, it is not surprising that Croatto is able to affirm that "the beatitudes are a summons to the oppressed to recognize the 'signs of the times' and, full of hope, to set out on the long march to liberation. They are not a call to resignation but a process of liberation."³

Since, as Gutiérrez says, "the poor, the classes of the common people are the force that transforms history . . . [those who] simultaneously subvert and evangelize,"⁴ and in turn, by the same token, the good news and the kingdom are identified with their

¹Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 177.
²Croatto, Exodus, p. 57.
³Ibid.
⁴Gutiérrez, "The Irruption of the Poor," p. 120.
liberative praxis, it is not surprising that the poor are regarded as the bearers of the gospel, the subject and carriers of the kingdom.¹ In fact, for Míguez Bonino "The struggles of the poor must be for us, in the deepest sense, good news."² The dynamic for the transformation of the conditions of life and the creation of a new world and a new day for all of mankind "lies in the hands of the poor of the world. All we can do is to enter into their struggle, to make their cause our own, to be evangelized by them."³ At this point, however, it is not clear whether we must identify with the poor because it is a Christian demand or because they provide us with the clue to the future.

Conclusion
Concluding that theology and the Church in Latin America were used to justify the outrageous situation of poverty and misery --contrary to the will of the liberating God--liberation theology has attempted to redefine these categories in terms of sociopolitical realities to make them instruments of transformation and liberation. Gutiérrez speaks of this reversal--in which the poor become the criteria for theological reflection and the test for ecclesiological legitimacy--as "the social appropriation of the gospel."

Theological reflection must find its point of departure in

²Míguez Bonino, "Poverty, as Curse, Blessing" p. 11.
³Ibid.
the concrete situation of the poor. Instead of starting with abstract theories, in solidarity with the victims of history it must start with liberative praxis. The Church, on the other hand, must shift sides, not only being ethically for the poor, but above all being of the poor, rethinking itself and its mission “from below,” from the position of the poor. Abandoning its pretense of "political neutrality," it must openly side with the oppressed and strive effectively to abolish injustice, an ecclesiological model best expressed through the Basic Ecclesial Communities and their praxis.

Traditional hermeneutics, it is argued, under the influence of Greek thought, averse to anything material or this-worldly, has spiritualized and allegorized the poverty theme in Scripture, converting it into a "virtue," a "religious ideal," necessary for other-worldly salvation. When taken in a more literal sense, poverty has generally been identified as the result of "fatality" or even as "God’s will," being consequently something unchangeable. In reaction to this sort of reductions which have led to tranquilizing conclusions and transformed the poor into a passive object of charity, liberation theologians have turned to Marxist social-class analysis and introduced it in their methodology as a necessary measure to prevent the spiritualization of the term "poor" and to insure that the liberation to be won is real liberation from real poverty and oppression. The concept of the poor thus acquired a very precise meaning: it became exclusively a sociological category, the struggling proletariat, those who, as in Marxist vision, are the shapers of history and have in their hands the seeds of the future.
Turning to the Bible, which is taken as a "second word" after the "first word" of social science, liberation theologians tend to reinterpret the biblical concern for the poor in terms of the proletariat in revolution against political and religious oppressors. There follows, then, a revolutionary reading of Scripture as the Biblia Pauperum with what appears as selective use of those texts which seems to correspond directly to liberation's concerns. References to the poor and oppressed in the Old Testament and particularly in the Gospel of Luke in the New Testament are radicalized. In the light of liberation theology's hermeneutics, "the poor" in Scripture, are understood in terms of socioeconomic categories and equated with the modern concept of "class," an interpretation that fundamentally strengthens the cause of the contemporary Latin American struggling poor.

In a legitimate protest against the classic spiritualization of poverty, has liberation theology lost itself in the socioeconomic dimensions of poverty? Can a one-dimensional focus on the poor as "sinners" or "the humble" be corrected by another one-dimensional focus on the poor as exclusively the oppressed proletariat? What are the implications of this concept of the poor for theological reflection and the Church? Hardly would anybody want to challenge liberation's emphasis on the biblical concern for the poor or that the Church must give priority to the poor, weak and suffering, but does the Bible, in fact, understand poverty and the poor in the same way liberation theologians might like to see? To these and related issues we turn our attention in the following part of this study.
CHAPTER III

THE RADICAL THEOLOGY OF THE POOR IN THE LIGHT
OF THE BIBLICAL MESSAGE

We have now reached the last stage of this study. In the two preceding parts we have discussed: First, the large and immediate contexts of the emergence of Latin American liberation theology. Second, after an analysis of liberation theology's method, marked by the strong determination to reinterpret Christian theology from the perspective of the poor, we focused attention on the concept of the poor as formulated in the context of liberationist ecclesiology and in turn how it relates to liberation theology's perception of the life and mission of the church and to its re-reading of Scriptures. This final chapter consists of an evaluation of the findings of chapter two. Here we reflect critically on the implications of the assumed concept of the poor for the method, theological content, and hermeneutics of liberation theology. Although as indicated in the introduction of this study, our assessment is based on a variety of criteria, it fundamentally reflects a Christian evangelical perspective, which is our own tradition.

1This includes mainly acceptance of the ultimate normativity and authority of Scripture, and the validity of its interpretation of historical events. It assumes acceptance of the supreme lordship of Jesus Christ, in whose life, death, and resurrection God's revelation found its culmination and finality.
Jürgen Moltmann has pointedly noted that theologians and the Church are faced more than ever with a double and complementary crisis: the crisis of relevance and the crisis of identity. "The more theology and the Church attempt to become relevant to the problems of the present day, the more deeply they are drawn into the crisis of their own Christian identity. The more they attempt to assert their identity in traditional dogmas, rights and moral notions, the more irrelevant and unbelievable they become."¹ Latin American liberation theology in a particular sense faces the reality of this crisis. While attempting to be relevant to the Latin American quest for freedom and self-affirmation it runs the risk of compromising the identity of its theological response.

This section addresses itself to this question. The following discussion takes a critical look at three aspects of the method of liberation theology which are dialectically interrelated and significant for the main concern of this study. The first point to be considered is the priority given to historical praxis in doing theology. The attention moves to the emphasis on "the historical context of the poor," understood not only as the exclusive locus for theological reflection but also as a source of revelation. Third, we turn to the crucial question of the identity of the poor as perceived by the liberationist use of social class-analysis.

The Priority of Praxis

Liberation theologians have unquestionably rendered a timely and important service to theology in forcefully calling attention to the fact that theology must always be oriented to practice. Correctly they challenge the rationalistic tendency of theology in its classical style, which in its ivory-tower syndrome, isolating itself from reality, has tended to become a docetic flight from the concrete world. Assuming the possibility of a "pure theology" derived from Scriptures and "systematized" or "applied" to practical ethical problems, it has in fact often assumed the possibility of a knowledge of truth without any intrinsic connection with the practice of truth.

The prophetic and apostolic message of the Bible certainly demands that truth be acted upon, that the believer walk in truth. Since Christian truth is always truth to be lived out and not merely truth to be intellectually known, there should be, in effect, no dichotomy between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, word and deed. Therefore the Greek vision of theory as self-sufficient contemplation, which exerted great influence on Western thought, is hardly applicable to Christian theology. If God's Word has practical purpose (2 Tim 3:16), the purpose of theology can be no less practical. Furthermore,

since theology has to do with salvation as already realized in Christ, its purpose is the mediation of this salvation in history. Therefore, its proper task is not to operate in the rarified atmosphere of thinking. Instead it must be a fundamentally practical science.

Extremely concerned with relevance, and attempting to avoid distractions from the historical task at hand, liberation theology, however, tends to overemphasize the notion of praxis as a corrective of traditional abstract theology whose ethic frequently remained indifferent to the social sphere. "Critical reflection on praxis," as we have seen, is generally the way in which liberation theology is described methodologically. Praxis, according to this formulation, not only becomes the first step in doing theology but also the only legitimate theological locus,¹ the decisive source and criterion of truth.² The issue here is not only a question of "transforming theology into mere praxiology." To the extent that liberation theology--curiously analogous to Marx's fundamental affirmation that

¹For liberation theologians praxis is not only the theological source par excellence, but the only theological source (see Croatto, Liberation y Libertad, p. 20). Gutiérrez leaves no doubt that it is within the historical praxis of subversive liberation that theology finds its "authentic locus" ("Por una teología y una liturgia de la liberación," Liaisons Internationales 10 [1975]:1; cf. Sobrino, "El conocimiento teológico" pp. 177-207).

²P. Richard, "Teología de la liberación latinoamericana," Liaisons Internationales 8 (1975):21; R. Viales, "Accotaciones a la problemática sobre el método en la teología de la liberación," in Liberación y cautiverio, p. 257. Historical praxis is transformed into the Christian Tribunal; it passes judgment on the truth or falsity of faith and from that judgment there can be no appeal" ("¿Qué es Cristianos por el Socialism?" quoted by Klopenburg, p. 41).
action precedes and determines thought\(^1\)--stresses the primacy of revolutionary praxis over theory it is ultimately subversive to the identity of theological content and threatens the fundamental structure of the Christian faith. Not surprisingly, Carl E. Braaten has called praxis the "Trojan horse of liberation theology."\(^2\)

Once the liberationist thesis about the priority of social praxis is accepted, the unavoidable conclusion is that there is no truth outside or beyond the concrete historical events in which man participates as agent.\(^3\) The truth claims of theology, then, are social products which reflect the class contradictions of their particular historical moment. In other words, theological content is as mutable as its social basis, and the essence of religion is not to be sought on the level of theological theory, but rather on the level of the historical praxis of the oppressed.

Furthermore, since Scripture plays only a referential role for liberation theology and has no normative or determinative

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\(^2\)Braaten, "Praxis: The Trojan Horse" p. 276.

\(^3\)When Gutiérrez condemns the "epistemological split" in traditional theology ("Praxis the liberación, p. 16), when Assmann speaks of the rejection of "any logos which is not the logos of praxis" (Opression-Liberation, p. 87), and when Segundo states that "no liberating God is revealed outside . . . historical events" (The Liberation of Theology, p. 118), they are in fact affirming that there is no truth or knowledge except in action itself (Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 88). The criterion for knowing truth, then, is not to be in agreement or disagreement with a previously given revelation, but with effectiveness in transforming history and liberating the poor.
function, it seems that concrete political commitment— informs by sociological analysis, especially in a Marxian sense—becomes the source of its notion of orthopraxis and ultimately the absolute criterion for truth and faith. If praxis is the tribunal for truth, then, contrary to Gutiérrez' definition, liberation theology tends to become merely a "reflexion of praxis in the light of praxis." How realistic, however, we must ask, is it to claim that we can discover what orthos is in the praxis of a particular political program? Furthermore, can this vision of truth (i.e., the truth discovered in political praxis) become the criterion of what is true in theology? Though of crucial importance, we must affirm, praxis cannot be a primordial locus theologicus or the principle of verification of truth. This would be to fall into a new positivism.

On the basis of the very nature of Christian theology, the liberationist contention for the priority of praxis must be seriously challenged. The ultimate and logical primacy of theory in

1See below.

2See Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 11-15.

3René Padilla notes that if there is no norm for evaluating praxis outside of praxis itself, then sheer utility will provide the only grounds for its justification—the end will justify the means ("Liberation Theology," RefJ 33 [1983]:150). Furthermore, even if theology "is a reflection on praxis in the light of faith," as Gutiérrez holds (A Theology, p. 13), but if "faith," as conceived within liberationist performative approach, is defined as "a liberative praxis" (Gutiérrez, "The Hope of Liberation," pp. 65-66), or as Assmann claims, "no more nor less than man's historical praxis which is essentially political" (Practical Theology of Liberation, p. 35), theology is transformed into a simple "reflection on praxis in the light of praxis."
the theological task seems implied by the essence of the Christian revelation. As indicated by the biblical witness, God's final and perfect revelation to mankind has taken place in Jesus Christ (Heb 1:1-3; John 1:1-18). This revelation, accessible through the medium of a particular kind of theory, the written word of Scriptures, not only has primacy over human praxis, but also determines and judges what correct praxis is. Furthermore, because Scripture is theopneustos, its truth is irreducible.\(^1\) Christian theology, because it is bound to this revelation which issues from a previous word of God, does not depend for its source of truth either on human praxis or on a particular political analysis. It seems, therefore, that if the Greek concept of theory as an end in itself is not appropriate to theology, neither is the notion of praxis as the absolute source and criterion for theological reflection.

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**Praxis or Pragmatism?**

Both the content and the nature of Scripture favor liberation theology's emphasis on the importance of orthopraxis for the correct understanding of the Christian faith.\(^2\) By adopting the idea of

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\(^1\) Liberation theologians give the impression that the truth of Christianity needs the validation of human praxis. Although the Bible certainly demands that truth be acted upon, as Kirk says: "The truth of revelation, because it depends upon God who reveals, is objectively true independently of whether it is believed and acted upon by man or not." A. Kirk, "The Meaning of Man in the Debate Between Christianity and Marxism," *Themelios* 1 (1976):91; Volf, p. 128.

\(^2\) The more we know, the more we are called to respond obediently, and this is because the more we obey, the more God makes Himself known. As Padilla correctly remarks, we know to the extent that we obey, that is the existential side of truth. But we are able
praxis as a supplement to the basic hermeneutical operations of theology, which necessarily come first, theologians certainly can benefit their discipline. Furthermore, adequately conceived, the notion of praxis will serve as a "challenge to all static views of truth and reality."¹ Liberation-ist's too narrow and too restrictive concept of orthopraxis, however, should not obscure the pitfalls of pragmatism and functionalism. Although hardly articulated univocally by liberation theologians,² praxis generally refers exclusively to practical political involvement for the liberation of the poor in social and economic terms: a particular kind of involvement (i.e., class struggle), informed by a particular kind of social analysis (i.e., Marxist). The question thus is not whether Christian theology should or should not endorse the notion of praxis, but who or what determines the meaning of the concept, the biblical gospel or an alien ideology.

Liberation theologians appeal to the Johannine theme of "doing the truth" (John 3:21, 7:17; cf. 1 John 1:6) to legitimate the to obey to the extent that we know God's commandments, promises, and judgments as they are revealed in Scripture; that is the cognitive side of truth, which precedes and guides obedience ("Liberation Theology " p. 15).


²Despite the evident importance of praxis for liberation theology, the concept is used without much effort to define its meaning. Gutiérrez in his A Theology of Liberation, pages 6-7, refers to "Christian praxis" in traditional Christian terms. A few pages later, however, the notion reappears, but here this praxis on which theology must reflect has the Marxist meaning of "transforming praxis" (pp.11-15; 23-33; 46-49). See McCann, Christian Realism, pp. 157-160; Juan Gutiérrez, The New Libertarian Gospel, chapt. 2.
notion "praxis" or "orthopraxis" as doing the truth, or to make praxis the criterion of truth.¹ There is, however, a wide difference between the biblical concept of Christian practice (to live the word of God and not only hear it; cf. 1 John 2:4)² and the notion of praxis understood as revolutionary action directed to changing the economic and social relationships. The biblical concept of "doing" as a presupposition of "knowing" certainly does include involvement in the liberation of the poor and oppressed. Yet it hardly can be limited to concrete political liberative action. In the context of the relation between doing and knowing, Paul, for example, speaks of "every good work" (ergo agatho, Col 1:10; 2 Cor 9:8; 2 Tim 3:17), a

¹Above, p. 139; Assmann, Theology for a Nomad Church, p. 76.


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technical term for works of charity done to both rich and poor.¹

By stressing the dialectical unity of theory and praxis in the act of faith, liberation theologians have recovered a very important biblical insight. But, in their excessive enthusiasm about "doing the truth" in its societal form, they run the serious danger of confusing the totality of Christian practice with the praxis of their own culture, losing sight of the comprehensive character of the "praxis" taught by God's word. Furthermore, the liberationist emphasis on external activity and social involvement runs the risk of equating surrender to Christ with one form of political activity and minimizing the dimension of interiority in the life of faith. More than mere political reaction to a historical context, Christian "praxis" springs primarily from fidelity to God's calling and is contingent upon the gospel.

Finally, we should ask, can the praxiological model of theology eliminate the theoretical dimension of the theological enterprise? Hardly. There are legitimate concerns in theology, especially in fundamental theology, which are only tangentially related to the cries of the poor and social justice. Not surprisingly, in its anti-metaphysical bent, which tends to minimize everything beyond history,¹ liberation theology is extremely


²To be consistent with what they take to be the existential meaning of faith in God, liberation theologians in general end up lacking the basis of an adequate metaphysics (see Schubert M. Ogden, Faith and Freedom, chap. 2; The Militant Gospel, pp. 315-318).
inadequate when it comes to questions that have no immediate bearing on politics and present well-being. The liberationist pragmatic view of praxis—which in turn is determined by its one-sided understanding of the poor—is at least partly responsible for the way the theologians of liberation flatten out certain dimensions of Christian theology and overlook those theological themes which point to the suprahistorical and personal concerns of the gospel.

The Context as the Text

Engaged in an extreme privatization of religion, traditional theology has taken flight into a conceptual world, often remaining insulated from and indifferent to the sociopolitical reality and concrete situation in which the individuals or communities which were being invited to believe found themselves. Liberation theology denounces classical theology for its non-situational objectivity, insisting that all true salvation theology should spring from existential historical realities. Therefore, since Latin America is marked by the overwhelming presence of the poor, theology cannot avoid the questions raised within this context.¹

¹Neuhaus remarks that the ignoring of the transcendent by liberation theology is in the long run a tactical mistake, "for the religious impulse and intuition is incurably, and rightly, hooked on the transcendent. To deny this impulse and intention is to set oneself against the motor force that gathers and sustains the religious community." "Liberation as Program and Promise: On Refusing to Settle for Less," CurrTM 2 (1975):90.

¹Throughout the centuries of church history, theology has often reflected the concerns of its historical context. Early Christians theologized in relation to questions raised in Alexandria or Constantinople, and their descriptions of the faith varied...
Not surprisingly, "at the heart of the theology of liberation is the affirmation of the contextual nature of theology."1 Understood as indigenization or as the need to correlate the two poles of the theological ellipse, namely, God's revelation and the world of human existence, contextualization is not a new item on the theological agenda.2 When liberation theologians insist on the contextualization of theology, however, from a careful analysis of what is advocated, one begins to suspect that the issue is much more complex than a simple call to take the context seriously.3

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1Sapcezian, "Theology of Liberation," p. 254.


3Liberation theology, it should be noted, is not primarily concerned with "understanding" culture, but with its liberation (Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 15; Míguez Bonino, "New Theological Perspectives" Re|Ed 66 [1971]:405). Thus, as Sapcezian observes, "refusal to indulge in abstract theologizing is in itself... no
From the liberationist perspective, the contextualization demanded involves "an unambiguous political commitment" to reality, a theological appropriation of the historical process of the oppressed class' struggle for liberation. As Harvie Conn notes, for liberation theologians contextualization "cannot become a 'fad' or a 'catchword' by abstraction from the economic dialectic of history." Since the idea of contextuality in the mind of the Latin theologians has fundamentally to do with a radical application of praxis, the political dimensions of liberation theology's understanding of history and the Marxist standards by which it analyzes those dimensions become inevitably determinative elements within this particular view of contextualization.

Keeping these notions in mind, we come to the hermeneutical question. In its positive attempt to be relevant to issues of contemporary Latin America, liberation theology proposes a "hermeneutical circulation" between text and context confronted in dialectic interplay. The Bible, we are told, must be "re-read from the context of the other 'Bible' of human history." This two-way assurance of contextuality" ("Theology of Liberation," p. 257). It demands political rootedness, solidarity with change in history and dialectic tension between doing theology and transforming the world.

1Conn, "Contextualization," p. 97.

2See above, pp. 212-219. For a summary of the hermeneutical position held by the different theologians of liberation, see Kirk, "The Bible in Latin American Liberation Theology" pp. 157-165; Padilla, "Liberation Theology," p. 22.

traffic between the situation and the word, the context and the text, leads to the crucial issue of authority. The question to be asked, thus, is what is the relationship between the "two Bibles?" Are they parallel in significance? Is human history to be illuminated and interpreted in the light of the word, or is the word to be subjected to and interpreted by situational contemporary reality?¹ In liberation theology's stated method of correlation between text and context, it is evident that the context becomes the primary authority, "the first theological reference point."² Hermeneutically starting with an ideologically interpreted context of oppression (i.e., Marxist definition of the poor and their oppressed situation), liberation theologians tend to reinterpret Scripture from that ideological perspective. The outcome of this approach is a subordination of the word of God to the human context, which results in a

Frontier of Theology in Latin America (Maryknoll N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), pp. 40, 47.

¹At the beginning of his book, Gutiérrez, as we have seen, defines theology as "a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word" (A Theology, p. 13). Significantly, however, he begins quoting the Bible in the second half of his magnum opus only (p. 155). After reading the whole volume, one wonders how much light the written word has, in fact, cast on the issues under discussion.

²Assmann, Opresión Liberación, p. 24. According to Assmann, the insistence on the historical situation of Latin America as the starting point for a theology of liberation is its greatest merit. As Costas observes, however, if this emphasis on the necessity of taking seriously the concrete historical situation as a primary frame of reference "is the greatest merit of liberation theology, it is also its greatest danger (The Church and Its Mission, pp. 251-253; Arthur F. Glasser and Donald McGravan, Contemporary Theologies of Mission [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983], p. 158; Samuel Scobar and John Driver, Christian Mission and Social Justice [Scottdale: Herald Press, 1978], p. 93).
selective reading of what can fit in the interpreted situation and a parallel dismissal of whatever is not considered important to praxis.¹

While classical theology has tended to over-emphasize the unchangeability, fixity, and absolute nature of God's revelation to the extent that it loses hold of the relationship between an ultimate objective revelation and contemporary concrete existential situation, liberation theology swings the pendulum to the other extreme. Its concentration on the reality of God's action in history and the incarnational aspect of salvation and praxis tend to lose sight of the absolute and normative in that which is revealed by the unchanging God.² It thus compromises the cognitive substance of God's revelation in Scripture to the extent that it becomes hard to distinguish our words about God from God's word.

Although we must acknowledge the importance of the context and affirm that it must be taken into serious consideration in the hermeneutical task, we must also keep in mind that the context is only an accident. It cannot, therefore, become an a priori to God's revelation which is for all men everywhere. Theology cannot be

¹We return to this question later.

²This tendency is clear in Assmann's affirmation: "The word of God is no longer a fixed absolute, an eternal proposition we receive before analyzing social conflicts and before committing ourselves to the transformation of historical reality" ("Statement," p. 299; cf. Opresión-liberación, pp. 62-63). Denying the possibility of any direct summons, he goes on to conclude that "God's summons to us, God's word today, grows from the collective process of historical awareness, analysis, and involvement" (ibid). In this case we are in the dark and left to the normativeness of self-authenticating praxis.
contextualized at the expense of the universality of God's word. If the situation becomes the ultimate court of appeal when it comes to the value and function of theology, there can be no control over the possible fantasies, reflections, and speculations which are generated by the community's special situation and concerns,¹ and theology is in danger of succumbing to historical reductionism.²

Finally, the tendency to magnify the "epistemological" or "hermeneutical" privilege of the poor and their context³ as the


²Emerging from a context of dialectic oppression, liberation theology seems to become concerned with but one single frame of reference. From its monistic interest, it looks at all reality from the perspective of the poor and oppressed ideologically identified, and tends to absolutize the significance of this historical context for theologizing. Liberation theologians, therefore, tend to make their own situation, particularly understood, the ultimate criterion for all theology. All too naturally the question arises as to whether other theological movements struggling against different forms of oppression—as, for example, black and feminist theologies—can accept that "only in association with the poor [the poor understood in terms of class analysis] can we carry on the work of theological reflection" (Gutiérrez, "Por una teología y liturgia de la liberación," Liaisons Internationales, 10 [1975]:11-12), or that "God is revealed only in the historical context of the poor" (Gutiérrez, "South American Liberation Theology," p. 116; see below).

³Assmann, "Statement," p. 300; Segundo, The Liberation of Theology, pp. 83-87; Gutiérrez, "Freedom and Salvation" p. 75; cf. above, pp. 183-184. There is validity in the affirmation that in the place where the poor stand, there is a greater possibility of seeing and understanding—in terms of faith and reality—what the rich and powerful cannot see and understand. As Míguez Bonino correctly remarks, "Power and wealth have a distorting effect, they freeze our view of reality. The standpoint of the poor, on the other hand, under the pricking of suffering and the attraction of hope, allows them to intuit the dawn of another reality." "New Trends in Theology," DukeDivR 42 (1977):141. The question however is whether this
theological locus par excellence is problematic if not altogether contradictory. Liberation theologians contend that "it is the periphery (the poor) or the repercussions on the periphery that is the privileged place for theological understanding." There is in this affirmation, however, a certain lack of consistence for the desired elimination of poverty would fatally result in the elimination, hardly to be desired, of a privileged source of both divine revelation and Christian theology. Thus, liberation theology's idealization of its socioeconomic context of oppression ultimately becomes a hindrance to the goal of liberation.

The sociopolitical reinterpretation of revelation

Liberation theology's strong emphasis on its contextual reality as the source of theological reflection is intimately connected with a sociopolitical reinterpretation of revelation. In their insistence on contextualization, liberation theologians tend to

"epistemological privilege" must be limited exclusively to the economically poor or, even worse, to those who conform to theoretical exigencies of ideological demands as Assmann suggests (Assmann, "Statement," p. 300). Is it not true that suffering--any kind of suffering--is a privileged place to perceive faith and reality? It seems that this is precisely the reason why the "poor" of the Psalms are frequently described as those who seek God (Ps 22:24; 35:10, 23; 69:29; 70:5; 74:19; 86:1-6, etc.; see below).


2See Kress, p. 128.
see the context of the poor already as an integral part of God’s revelation, the privileged if not exclusive locus of God’s self-disclosure.

Reflecting the influence of modern developments in Catholic theology and biblical studies, Vatican II emphasized the dynamic (not merely the conceptual) dimension of the mystery of revelation and placed it in the context of the history of Salvation. Liberation theology, however, proposes a significant variation from the Council’s thought. Although for liberation theologians history is the locus revelationis in the strongest sense of the term, there is, however, a new way in which God is revealed in history, namely through the poor. “The God we believe and hope in comes to us as the God of the poor, the God of the oppressed. This is why he reveals himself only to the person who does justice to the poor.”

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1Vatican II’s "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” in Abbott’s The Documents of Vatican II, pp. 111-128. For a brief summary see McBrien, Catholicism, pp. 219-220. From the perspective of this new understanding, the Council views revelation not simply as divine speech, or as the communication of specific truths, but as something comprising both word and deed (“Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” art. 2).

2See I. André-Vincent, "Les théologies de la libération," NouRTh 98 (1976): 112-113. Arguing that there is nothing in the Bible which is not historical, Gutiérrez suggests that there is nothing in history which is not the word of God (The Power of the Poor, pp. 3-22). This confusion between general history and divine revelation pervades the writings of the majority of liberation theologians. See in the collected work Fé cristiana y compromiso, Scannone, pp. 263ff., and Assmann, pp. 342-345.

3Cf. Gutiérrez, The Power of the Poor, p. 120.

For Gutiérrez, as for liberation theologians in general, God is disclosed only in the historical context of liberation. "History is the scene of the revelation God makes of the mystery of his person." There is, however, a significant qualification to that: "His word reaches us in the measure of our involvement in the evolution of history." Affirming that the divine summons are not directly accessible (because of the false mediations of traditional hermeneutics), liberation theology rejects from the start the possibility of going directly to the heart of Christianity, i.e. to its original sources. Today, God's word is mediated through the cry of the poor. Revelation therefore happens when we recognize and accept God's summons to us to participate in the historical process of liberation. "God is revealed only in the concrete historical context of liberation of the poor," affirms Gutiérrez.

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1 Gutiérrez, "Faith and Freedom," Horiz 2 (1979):32, 38. Each moment in history is a new theological locus, a new source of revelation for one who can read the "signs of the times." The present moment in history, marked by the process of liberation, appears to Latin American theology to be the context of revelation. Elsewhere Gutiérrez affirms that we encounter God "in concrete actions toward others, especially the poor" (A Theology, p. 195; cf. Claude Geffré "A Prophetic Theology," in the Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith, p. 16).


Consistent with their methodology, liberation theologians no longer regard theology as a response to God's self-disclosure through the divine-human authorship of the Bible. This revelation from "outside" is replaced by a direct perception of God in the matrix of human interaction with history, mediated through the lives and struggles of the poor. Liberation theology thus situates the crucial moment of revelation at a different point. Gutiérrez, like the other liberation theologians, in fact, says that among the exploited class is the place where God is available to people today.

1 The traditional vision of God as a static being who is distant and remote from human history (God as "up there" or "out there"), liberation theologians argue, tends to manipulate God in favor of the capitalistic social structure. It is ultimately responsible for the passivity and superstitious religiosity found among Latin America's common people as they face injustice and oppression. On the contrary, for Gutiérrez God is not an immutable entity "outside the world." He is the driving force of "permanent cultural revolution" (A Theology, p. 195). The God of liberation theology is a God whose primary if not sole passion is the freeing of the oppressed from the bondage of economic oppression. Focusing exclusively "on the existential meaning of God," as Ogden says, liberation theology does not deal "at all adequately with the metaphysical being of God in himself" (ibid). He further elaborates his view, affirming that it is only through

2 Gutiérrez, "Liberation Movements and Theology," Conc 93 (1974):135-156. One perceives an ambiguous notion in Gutiérrez' treatment of the issue of revelation. On the one hand he talks about the "sources or revelation" (A Theology, p. 12), apparently referring to the Bible and tradition embodied in Church dogmas. On the other hand, he remarks that "a theology which has as its points of reference only truths which have been established once and for all . . . can only be static and, in the long run, sterile" (ibid). He further elaborates his view, affirming that it is only through
When speaking about liberation theology as an understanding of faith articulated from a commitment to a solidarity with the oppressed classes and starting from their context, liberation theologians seem to restrict the availability of God to the poor and those struggling for them. This too facile and narrow identification of revelation, with a specific social group is ultimately a too positivistic verification of revelation. The logic of this notion of revelation—which attempts to limit the freedom of God's self-disclosure—leads to the conclusion that in order to experience the presence of God today or to be able to theologize, one must first join the movements of secular history and be committed in a concrete way to the liberation of the poor.\(^1\)

Liberation theology's excessive emphasis upon the poor gives the impression that the poor are not only the object of God's concern but the salvific and revelatory subject. The cry of the oppressed participation in the process of liberation that nuances of the Word of God which are imperceptible in other existential situations will be heard (ibid., pp. 49-50). It seems that for liberation theologians, God preeminently reveals himself when believers enter into solidarity with the poor, and engage in the struggle to transform the social structures responsible for social evils. In his recent Models of Revelation (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1983), Avery Duûtes includes the liberationist notion of revelation under the rubric of "revelation as new awareness" (p. 29, 30, 98-114). In this case, revelation takes place as an expansion of consciousness or shift of perspective when people join in the movements of secular history. God, in this approach, is not a direct object of experience but mysteriously present as the transcendent dimension of human engagement in creative tasks. In his evaluation, Dulles observes that the most persistent objection against this understanding of revelation has to do with its lack of fidelity to Scripture (p. 111).

\(^1\)See Dunn, p. 233.
alone is the voice of God. Everything else is projected as a vain attempt to comprehend God by some self-serving means. This, however, is a confused and misleading notion. Is God's self-revelation in a contemporary segment of history the only relevant revelation of God to a particular people in a particular context? Are not liberation theologians in danger of fundamentally misunderstanding the revelation of God, when they take only one aspect of it in near-isolation, without taking into account all the other forms in which God has manifested himself, particularly in Jesus Christ? Can we affirm that God is knowable exclusively in the poor? Contrary to the liberationist tendency to absolutize one form of God's revelation in history, we must affirm that while biblical theology reveals that God is for the poor, it hardly makes the poor or their situation the actual embodiment of God in the world.

The liberationist sociopolitical reinterpretation of God's revelation, therefore, can hardly be reconciled with Scripture. In repudiating the "outsider God," it rejects a central biblical theme. Its immanentistic approach not only restricts the cognitive value of revelation and implies that revelation has no fixed content, it also effectively contributes to a relativization of Christ's finality as the ultimate source of God's truth in history (John 1:1-18; 14:6; Heb 1:1-3). Misleadingly, it implies that Christians today can no longer be satisfied by the primal revelation enshrined in Scripture.

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Dulles, Models of Revelation, pp. 110-111.
Past events and doctrines are revelation only insofar as they have illuminative power for the present struggle for liberation, being consequently subject to continual reinterpretation in the situational perspective of epochal shift and of contextual awareness.

Liberation Theology and the Social Class Analysis

How does liberation theology appropriate God's revelation through the poor? By means of sociological analysis it seems! If Christians are to hear what God's revelation has to say in present-day Latin America, the concrete reality of the continent must be understood. When adequately appropriated, this revelation creates a coherent set of action-oriented ideas, an ideology which provides the basis for a specific praxiology, a program of action to transform reality. In other words, the situation of the poor requires effective action. Effective action, however, presupposes a scientific analysis of the structural causes of poverty, which will point the direction for action. At this point, as we have indicated earlier, the theologians of liberation turn to the use of Marxist modes of analysis of society, which offer a global interpretation of the Latin American situation in terms of class struggle. Class analysis in conflictive terms, in turn, becomes part of the method of liberation theology.2

A critique of liberation theology's appropriation of Marxism

2 See Gudorf, Catholic Social Teaching, p. 61.
has been made from different perspectives. Its arguments do not need to be repeated here. All that our study requires are a few comments intended to introduce the issue of the identity of the poor, to be developed more amply in the next section. As we have already noticed, liberation theologians are not uncritical in their appropriation of Marxism. Paradoxically, however, while rejecting the notion of autonomy and objectivity for the Christian faith and theology, they ultimately seem unwilling to apply the same view of truth to Marxism. As Padilla pointedly remarks, "One need not to be reactionary to see that something is wrong if theology is asked to eschew objectivity in Biblical interpretation and to be guided by the Marxist claim to

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1See Kirk, Liberation Theology, pp. 160-168; Kirk, "Beyond Capitalism and Marxism: Dialogue with a Dialogue," ThFBul 1 (1976): 34ff; Coon, "Theologies of Liberation: Toward a Common View," pp. 413-418; René Padilla, "Liberation Theology," in The Challenge of "Marxist and Neo-Marxist Ideologies for Christian Scholarship, ed. John C. Vander Stelt (Sioux Center: Dort College Press, 1982), pp. 86-103; Chris Sugden, "Latin America: Where Marxism Challenges Christians to Be Just," in Christianity and Marxism, ed. Alan Scarfe and Patrick Sookhdeo (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1982), pp. 112-125. The use of Marxist methods of social analysis by liberation theologians is a major and difficult issue. It has been the source of concern to many in the Church, even when liberation theologians explicitly disavow Marx's atheism (see the Vatican's Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation, pp. 17-23). The role of Marxism in liberation theology, however, must be candidly understood. Some critics have implied that liberation theology and Marxism are indistinguishable, but this is hardly accurate. Some exaggerations such as that of the prestigious Colin Brown's Dictionary of the New Testament Theology, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), which treats Latin American liberation theology under the heading "War" (3:972-976), are not only unfair but misleading as well.

2See Miguéz Bonino, "La fe en busca de eficacia," p. 116. As Padilla correctly observes, what is at stake here is a double-edged mistake: first, a subjectivistic concept of revelation (i.e., the knowledge of God is exclusively a matter of "existential encounter").
scientific objectivity in the socio-economic analysis."\(^1\) Strongly attracted by Marxism's claims of "scientific objectivity," liberation theology tends to give it areas of complete autonomy\(^2\) as well as a privileged role in its theory of praxis, while denying a similar function to Scripture.

The evident question is how "scientific" and "objective" is Marxist analysis?\(^3\) Is the Marxist interpretation of the historical reality without presuppositions and less limited by social conditioning than the reading and interpretation of the Bible? If Marxism is to be adopted as a "scientific theory," what kind of precaution is taken so that the theory—with its undergirding philosophical premises and ideological principles which are part of a materialistic worldview—may be kept under control by the belief-content of an authentic Christian commitment? Even taking into

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\(^1\) Padilla, "Liberation Theology," pp. 16-17.

\(^2\) Kirk, "Beyond Capitalism and Marxism," p. 36.

\(^3\) Since Marxism is not limited to a scientific and purely objective-descriptive analysis of reality, but at the same time proposes a revolutionary theory about how and why to change this reality, one may wonder what the real nature of Marxism is. Is it an economic theory? a political science? a philosophical anthropology? or a secular eschatology? (See Kirk, Liberation Theology, pp. 162-166). For this reason, the borrowing of a method of approach to reality or commitment to its theoretical stance should be preceded by a careful and solid epistemological critique. This preliminary critical study, however, is missing in liberation theology (see Vatican's Instruction, p. 18; Kirk, "The Meaning of Man in the Debate Between Christianity and Marxism," ThFBul 2 [1974]:19).
consideration the serious effort of liberation theologians to isolate Marxism as an instrumental tool of social analysis from Marxism as a systemic whole, one wonders whether it is possible to separate parts of this epistemologically unique complex. Not surprisingly, recent Vatican pronouncements on liberation theology have warned against the danger of "embracing certain elements of Marxist analysis without taking due account of their relation with its ideology."¹

There is in this concern a fundamental truth which cannot be dismissed as "conservative ideology." It seems evident that even as a tool, Marxism still builds on a materialistic definition of man rooted in the Enlightenment, i.e., man as bearing within himself the power to transform himself and society. Thus, how realistic is the notion of a "qualified acceptance" of Marxism? Can it be accepted as a

tool of scientific analysis in isolation from its anthropology? Furthermore, can an ideology that traces the origins of all alienation to class struggles be made an autonomous guide for Christian commitment? Is this conflictive sociological analysis an adequate guide and criterion for the apprehension of God's revelation in the needs of the poor? Giving to Marxism an almost "religious" importance, liberation theologians too readily accept the definition of the human condition and possibilities as offered by a class-oriented ideology which is hardly in agreement with either the historical facts or biblical revelation.

The Poor as Defined by Class Analysis

As indicated earlier, in the Latin American context social class analysis is felt necessary to prevent the cooptation of the terms "poor/oppressed" and to insure that the liberation to be won is real liberation from real oppression, material poverty.\(^1\) The identity of the poor and the character of their situation thus are determined "scientifically" according to the class-struggle analysis. Liberation theologians, as we have seen, tend to interpret society within Marx's dualistic model of the exploiter/exploited dialectic. Under the specific circumstances of Latin America--where poverty and oppression cannot simply be attributed to misfortune or human error--one may certainly sympathize with the tendency to perceive society's polarization. Caution, however, is necessary if the pitfalls of

\(^1\)See above, pp. 161-168.
a sociological captivity are to be avoided. The absolutization of this understanding of society fundamentally tends to reduce human existence to its material dimension and easily makes economics the basis of every aspect of reality.¹

The liberationist Marxist-influenced view of society implies the presence of two groups existing alongside each other, viz., the poor/oppressed, conceived by liberation theologians as "poor" in all senses (economically and spiritually), and the non-poor/oppressors, considered "poor" in no sense. Poverty and wealth thus become exclusively a materialistic issue. This radical clear-cut view, however, is obviously problematic at the theological level. Theologically no one would argue for the actual existence of a group of people falling into the category of "poor in no sense," since one can be rich in some sense and share other forms of poverty.² On the other hand, it is also problematic to regard the materially poor as "poor in all senses," or as automatically being "poor in spirit," as liberation theologians suggest.³

¹Not surprisingly liberation theologians are strongly marked by a disposition to see every social-political issue as a conflict between rich and poor, with the resulting tendency to state social, ethical, and religious issues as a matter of oppressed against oppressors. Stanley Hauerwas, "The Politics of Charity," Interp, 31 (1977):254-255. They also tend to apply the oppressor/oppressed polarization on a global scale. In this case, as Joseph C. Allen remarks, "the wider the net is cast, the more questionable its applicability becomes." Joseph C. Allen, Love & Conflict (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), p. 169.

²See Gort, "Gospel for the Poor?" p. 335.

³For Dussel, for example, "those who are materially poor are the poor in spirit" ("The Kingdom of God and the Poor," p. 116).
Furthermore, the oppressed/oppressor alignment tends to overlook the fact that many people who are oppressed in one relationship may function as oppressors in others. Not surprisingly, liberation theologians, while focusing on economic oppression, hardly mention the oppression of socialist systems, racial oppression, or the subjugation of women,¹ an issue especially relevant for Latin America where an oppressive machismo pervades and dominates the entire culture. Further exploring liberation theology's adoption of the exploiter/exploited dialectic, we must also take into consideration the issue of collective guilt² and the question of violence implied in this model, with the ultimate implication of translating the biblical notion of God being on the side of the poor is terms of class-struggle.³

Not only does liberation theology tend to define the poor in terms of Marxist categories, but, ironically, in attempting to

¹Should not women, particularly in Latin America, be included among the "poor" and "oppressed"? No wonder feminist liberation theologians tend to be skeptical of a strictly dualistic view of society (Letty M. Russel, Human Liberation, pp. 167-168). It basically disregards other forms of "poverty" and "oppression" no less dehumanizing than economic oppression.

²According to this idea, simply by belonging to a particular social group (e.g., being a United States citizen), one is guilty of the evils ascribed to that group or system. This "guilt association" tactic, as Allen notes, in the realm of moral deliberation about external action, is utterly inappropriate. It makes no sense to blame persons for actions with which they had no traceable connection, which they did not will, and which they could not have prevented (Joseph C. Allen, Love and Conflict, p. 174; Theodore R. Weber, "Guilt: Yours, Ours, and Theirs," Worldview 10 [1975]:15-22).

³This is clear in the liberationist use of the Exodus motif. See above, pp. 214-224; below, pp. 326-331.
avoid the traditional "romantic" interpretation of the poor, it also
ends up adopting Marxist "romantic" and often dogmatic views about
the proletariat. Dividing society sharply between oppressed and
oppressors, the impression is given that the former are the "good
guys" and the latter "the bad guys," with the underlying idea that
only the rich and their capitalist structure are capable of evil and
suggesting that, as John McKenzie notes in his review of Miranda's
Marx and the Bible, "there is nothing wrong with the poor, except
that they are poor." This notion, which tends to equate the
oppressors with sin and the oppressed with virtue in a new

1H. Lepargneur refers to this tendency as "the Manichaeism of
liberation theology" ("Théologies de la libération et théologie tout
court," p. 165-168), i.e. all evil comes from the 'other,' the
oppressor. See E. Dussel, Les luttes de libération bousculent la

280. The world, we must remember, is not made up, like some Western
movies, of "goodies and baddies." All have potential for good, all
are infected by evil. Although the rich are subject to vices that
must be opposed, it is a mistake to idealize the poor and make them
"righteous." The poor, as Dulles says, "can sin as much by envy and
covetousness as the rich by pride and avarice." "The Meaning of Faith
Considered in Relationship to Justice," in The Faith That Does

3Stephen Neil observes that one of the Marxist myths that has
proved most widely acceptable "is that of the sinless victim, the
proletariat. All wickedness is on the side of the strong, the weak
are blameless, endowed with all virtues, and waiting only for an
opportunity to exercise them in freedom." "The Nature of Salvation,"
Chmn 89 (1975):229; see also Lepargneur's discussion of "the myth of
the people" of liberation theology (pp. 137-140). What would sin
consist of for the oppressed? one is tempted to ask. It seems that
for liberation theologians the sin of the poor consists in their
acquiescence to the oppressive situation (Dussel, "The Kingdom of God
and the Poor" p. 123; Justo and Cathrine Gonzalez, Liberation
Preaching, p. 23; J. Cone, Black Theology of Liberation, p. 100).
formulation of the saints-and-sinners dialectic of Christianity, is too often an oversimplified division between good and bad. It fundamentally overlooks the fact that sin involves more than the sin of "oppressive structures." Though not wrong, this view is superficial. Liberation theologians seem to pay insufficient attention to the basic failure of Marx to understand the true nature of man's alienation: rebellion against God as revealed and exposed in biblical revelation.

To affirm, as Dussel does, that because the poor are not a constituent part of the system or "owners of capital and holders of power" they are "non sinners, thus righteous, and . . . the subjects of the kingdom," is to neglect the radical nature and mystery of sin, which according to the witness of Scripture goes deeper than the structures and economic relations and cannot fundamentally be affected by mere elimination of poverty through social and political measures. Furthermore, if being materially poor is equivalent to

1Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 175. Liberation theologians rightly place emphasis on the neglected corporate dimension of sin. They tend, however, to overstate their case, conceiving sin almost exclusively in a collective sense. Can we say with Dussel, that the essence of sin is "oppression of the poor and alienation of the fruits of their work"? (The Kingdom of God and the Poor," p. 125). More than an attribute of any personal condition or act, sin is an attribute of the oppressive structures of capitalist society, which can be eliminated by removing oppression and redistribution of power and wealth (see Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology, 2 vols. [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984], 2:590-593). Liberation theology is right in broadening the concept of sin to include the social dimension. Unfortunately, it does not really explore the radical nature of sin. It remains on the same plane as Marx, viewing sin as injustice among people.

being righteous, one is tempted to ask, Why should anyone fight poverty? Shall we let poverty increase so that righteousness may increase all the more? While we may say that the sins of the rich are not the sins of the poor, their basic need is essentially the same. "In the preaching of Jesus no one class is made a paragon of virtue," observes Dulles, "all are admonished to examine their motives and to repent."¹ Conversely, if the rich are the "sinners," then, according to the logic of the gospel, which holds that "the healthy and righteous do not need a doctor" (Luke 5:31-32) the Church's preferential love should not be for the poor, but precisely for the rich, for it is they who are so far from God's kingdom.

Marxist's utopianism and "idealistic" view of human nature² is also reflected in the liberationist optimistic view of the role of the poor as the creators of justice in the historical process of change. Gutiérrez' eschatology lies in the work of the materially


poor. "The future of history," he affirms, "belongs to the poor and exploited. True liberation will be the work of the oppressed themselves." They are the force to transform history, the true liberators and the artisans of the new humanity.

It seems evident that for Gutiérrez the poor play the same role as the proletarian masses do for Marx. "The salvation of

\[\text{1Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 208. Gutiérrez here echoes Marx's affirmation in The Communist Manifesto that the proletariat "is the class that holds the future in its hands" (cf. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works [New York: International Publishers, 1968], p. 44). The last sentence in Gutiérrez' statement ("in them [the poor] the Lord saves history"), however, seems to reflect an attempt to reconcile Christianity and Marxism, a pattern that runs throughout his work.}\]

\[\text{2Gutiérrez, "The Irruption of the Poor," p. 120.}\]

\[\text{3Gutiérrez, "South American Theology," pp. 110-111. Not surprisingly, the "historical actions" of the poor, are described as "salvific actions" (cf. Kloppenburg, The People's Church, p. 100).}\]

\[\text{4Cf. John Plamenatz, Karl Marx's Philosophy of Man (Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 168. Marx believed with remarkable faith that the proletariat are the only people who can achieve changes. They would destroy the present oppressive type of society eliminating alienation by making men for the first time masters of their destiny. They need only be taught the way to change things and they will hasten the inevitable break-down of the capitalist system of private property. Beyond this lies the new Communist society (see Poetsch, pp. 44-49). Liberation theologians seem to follow this belief, insisting that the Christian identification with the class that is destined to be the whole could help towards social unity (see Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, p. 122; Gutiérrez, "South American Theology," pp. 110-119; A Theology, pp. 113-114; cf. Fierro, The Militant Gospel, p. 386). Hardly surprising, the Basic Ecclesial Communities are regarded as "schools for those who will forge history" (Berrymann, Religious Roots of Rebellion, p. 334). It should be noted, however, that there is no factual basis for the Marxist view of history as an inescapable march toward the liberation of the proletariat and a classless society. See G. Cottier, Esperanzas enfrentadas: Cristianismo y Marxismo (Bogotá CEDIAL, 1975); Bockmuehl, The Challenge of Marxism.}\]
humanity passes through them," affirms the Peruvian theologian. "They are the bearers of the meaning of history."¹ The poor, we are told, are the key to history. That being the case, the aim of the Christian is to identify with their cause, as if nothing is more important than that. From this insistence, however, it is not clear whether liberation theologians think we must identify with the poor because this is the Christian calling or because the poor provide us with the clue to the future and thus the means for Christianity to continue to be culturally significant.

While Gutiérrez finds in Marx's dialectical view of man and history the basis for his notion of the poor as the victorious group, those who liberate themselves and history, he avoids using Marx's description of the Communist state as the fulfillment of historical development. Instead, he uses Christian imagery calling the fulfillment of history, or the aim of the struggle, the kingdom.² Temporal progress, to be sure, is not equated with the kingdom of God. Yet, the historical, political, liberating event is intrinsically linked with the kingdom. In opposition to the traditional thinking which considered the kingdom as a reality that works within history,

¹Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 203.

²This transposition of terms is an example of the difficulty one encounters when trying to get to the bottom of liberation theologians' conceptions. Harold O. J. Brown has called attention to the misleading character of liberation theology's language, which often adopts biblical concepts but gives to them nonbiblical content. "True and False Liberation in the Light of Scripture," in Perspectives on Evangelical Theology, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzen and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), pp. 136-140.
but from outside history, for Gutiérrez, the progress of justice and man's struggle for liberation is the growth of the kingdom and is a salvific event.¹

In his eagerness to see the socioeconomic structures of Latin America changed, Gutiérrez attempts to protect man's autonomy and free creativity by affirming the moral capability of the oppressed to cooperate with God in the construction of the kingdom.² In doing so, however, he gives the impression that the poor in their search for a more just society can never go wrong or misuse man's creative faculties. This boundless optimism in man's capacity—which underplays the ambivalence of all human activity—seems to come from liberation theologians' reading of humanist philosophy,³ rather than

¹Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 177. There is in Gutiérrez' treatment of the kingdom an unsolved ambiguity. On the one hand, he seems to suggest that the kingdom is a work of man (ibid., p. 122). On the other, however, to protect God's sovereignty he underlines that the kingdom is above all a gift of God (ibid., p. 177). As Dale Vree observes, Gutiérrez "actually succeeds in truncating man's autonomy (because man cannot finish what he has started) and compromising God's omnipotence (because God cannot start what he alone can finish)" ("Christian Marxists," p. 42; Dunn, pp. 244--245).

²Liberation theologians rely on contemporary Catholic theologians, such as Karl Rahner and Teilhard de Chardin, for the insistence on the intrinsic link between man's action in history and the coming of the kingdom (Segundo, The Liberation of Theology, p. 141; cf. Costas, Christ Outside the Gate, pp. 129-130). In Gutiérrez, however, the Marxist's emphasis on man's ability and responsibility to bring about a better world puts a shadow on the emphasis of these theologians in the ultimate realization of the kingdom as the work of God's hands and not to be equated with human progress. See K. Rahner, "The Theological Problems Entailed in the Idea of the 'New Earth,'" Theological Investigations, 10:270; P. Teilhard de Chardin, Building the Earth (New York: Avon 1965).

³Gutiérrez acknowledges that the notion of man coming from Hegel, Marx, and Marcuse should not be indiscriminately accepted (A
from their existential experience of the human condition. It seems paradoxical, therefore, to want to place such high stakes on an optimism born out of philosophical speculation when these theologians are so concerned with the realm of praxis.

Liberation theologians correctly call attention to the often neglected social dimension of the gospel. Still, a revolution which --because of its partial, i.e., materialistic vision of the poor-- conceives liberation as a process mainly concerned with socioeconomic situation, poses the serious danger of the oppressed adopting the standards of the oppressors. Thus when the revolutionary group turns the tables, what will probably emerge is hardly the "growing of the kingdom" or the "new man,"¹ but rather a new oppressor.² Liberation,

¹For Gutiérrez, as we have seen, the ultimate result of the action of the poor in history toward liberation is the creation of "the new man" within a truly egalitarian, fraternal society (A Theology, p. 32). But he does not indicate those areas that he would reconsider or reject. Nor articulating the critique that he himself admits is required, the Peruvian theologian does not clarify to what extent he endorses Marx's anthropolog, or where he leaves Marx and enters into a Christian view of man and history.

²Leninist-Marxist ideology also claims that redistribution of wealth and "public self-government presupposes a different type of man, and, in turn creates him. The Communist man is not an egotist and not an individualist." Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism (Moscow:
therefore, runs the risk of accomplishing simply the replacement of one tyrant with another.

The strength of liberation theology lies in its compassion for the poor and in its conviction that Christians should not remain passive and indifferent to their plight. Yet, the rhetoric of liberation theologians could engender some confusion. In their attempt to adapt Marxist analysis to the conditions of Latin America and make the poor and disinherited the bearers of revolution, they seem to overlook that the Christian "option for the poor" and Marx's vision of the proletariat are hardly compatible. Marx concentrated on the industrial proletariat as the universal class, entrusted with a special role in the revolution and the making of the new society. He showed, however, little sympathy for the unemployables and outcasts in the cities, the Lumpen as he called them.¹ In the Bible,

¹See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works (New York: International Publishers, 1968), pp. 44, 138, 145, 168, 176, 178, 243. For Marx the Lumpen had no destiny in society. Within Marxism there are no grounds for making moral choices, since these merely reflect the subjective views of men who are determined by their position in the economic and class structures of their society (Sugden, "Latin America," pp. 114-115). In Marxism, option for the proletariat is merely a functional matter. They are the ultimate class, to side with them is to side with the victorious party. Capitalism is destined to disappear, not because the system is unjust and ought to go; it should go because it will go.
on the other hand, the mandate for special concern for the poor emerges as a proof of fidelity to the covenant with the Lord. Such "option for the poor" is a comprehensive option for the needy. It can hardly be limited to one social class or to those ideologically identified. Besides, although Scripture describes God as being on the side of the poor,¹ nowhere does it present the poor as endowed with moral superiority or confer on them a privileged position of greater wisdom as if they hold the key to history or social progress. This does not mean that human liberating work should be renounced. It rather suggests that if, in carrying it forward, stress is placed on the oppressed's struggle for self-emancipation, it, in the words of Norman J. Young,

expects too much and too little--too much of man who consistently turns his creative capacities to destructive ends; too little of God who comes from beyond man's own sphere of manangement to offer new directions and possibilities.²

We started this section with the fundamental question of relevance and identity. Liberation theology has demonstrated that traditional theology has often compromised the relevance of the Christian message and tended to overlook some crucial biblical themes, e.g., the inseparability of orthodoxy and orthopraxis, the incarnational character of theology, and that concern for social justice is a central biblical teaching. In its corrective attempt, however, liberation theology has also shown some inherent

¹See below, pp. 326-330.
limitations. These limitations, which in the preceding discussion we attempted to express in relation to the liberationist's focus on the poor, can to some extent be summarized as a tension between methodology and content. The decision of liberation theology to make a concrete political commitment to praxis as the "primordial locus theologicus," as well as its view of contextuality, seriously endangers the identity of theological reflection. Christian theology not only demands that priority be given to divine revelation and its theory of truth, but also asserts transcendence over contextual captivity.

We focused particular attention on the demand of liberation theology for an application of the Marxist analysis as the best tool available to establish the terms in which the struggle for justice in Latin America must be waged. The concept of the poor articulated in terms of class struggle, however, tends to compromise and limit the intention of doing theology "from the perspective of the poor." Furthermore, liberation theology's definition of the poor, more in tune with Marxist dialectic than with biblical concern for the poor, anthropologically and eschatologically, leads one to wonder whether liberation theologians have not, by and large, gone beyond an acceptance of Marxist insights warranted by biblical revelation and fallen into a sociological captivity. Continuing our investigation in the following section we further explore the

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theological implications of the view of the poor adopted by liberation theology.

Liberation Theology and the Ecclesia Pauperum

Once the identity of the poor and the character of their situation have been "scientifically" identified through Marxist analysis, and the concept of liberation—mainly defined in terms of bringing socioeconomic freedom for the oppressed in history—is introduced as a function for theology, theological reflection finds itself radically redefined. The implications here are particularly crucial for two interrelated theological notions, namely, the concept of salvation as well as the understanding of the nature and mission of the church. To these we now turn our attention.

The Salvation of the Poor

Under the influence of a dualistic Greek philosophy, the church traditionally perceived reality in a two-storied dimension, in two separate spheres—the non-historical universe, the superior and exalted realm of timeless truth, spirit, soul, and supernatural salvation, all beyond the human world of history on the one hand, and on the other, the inferior and mundane sphere, usually associated with the evil realm of matter, body, and nature. The option between these two realities, viewed irreconcilable, seemed clear. The church

As Lindbeck remarks, the physical universe and secular history were viewed not as the world which God loves and redeems...
became overconcerned with the supernatural realm, displaying a
decided lack of interest in the temporal, empirical side of human
life,\(^1\) which not only fell outside of its interest but was also
considered religiously and morally irrelevant.

As a significant corrective to this spiritualizing bias,
liberation theology has exposed the infiltration of Platonic dualism
into traditional Western theology which made the gospel and salvation
overly individualistic and otherworldly. However, in its effort to
readdress the content of the gospel to intrahistorical realities and
to elaborate a more comprehensive view of salvation,\(^2\) liberation
theology swings the pendulum too far toward the opposite extreme.
While in the traditional approach salvation had little to say to the
materially dispossessed, now its message is primarily, if not
exclusively, addressed to the oppressed and their condition.

\(^1\)In this approach, the gospel was mainly conceived in terms
of comfort for individual human souls and interpreted exclusively as
the announcement of forgiveness of sin and guilt. Salvation was
fundamentally individualistic and otherworldly oriented. Neither the
gospel nor salvation, thus, were thought to have any kind of direct
bearing on the historical current of humanity. See E. Schillebeeckx,
6-14, 48.

\(^2\)Gutiérrez advocates a broader view of salvation, one "which
embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its
fullness in Christ" (A Theology, p. 153). At the end, however, he
tends to relate salvation only to the political sphere of life. Carl
(1981):127-130; Bloech, "Soteriology in Contemporary Christian
Thought," pp. 137-139; Costas, Christ Outside the Gate, p. 129.
If the gospel is directed specifically to the materially poor, salvation is located in the historical, social realm. The good news of liberation is aimed primarily at the structural problems of injustice, poverty, inequality. In fact, it tends to become limited to the present age, and a fortiori identified preeminently with immediate material well-being, hic et nunc.\(^1\) Within this vision, salvation is temporalized and this-worldly bound to the extent that it is virtually equated with socioeconomic-political liberation.\(^2\) This immanentist paradigm of salvation, however, though timely and appealing, is not sufficiently satisfactory. It correctly exposes the traditional all-absorbing concentration of the spiritual and the beyond and calls attention to the social implications of the gospel. But how shall we distinguish this intrahistorical salvation from the solution offered by the politician, social worker or economist? Furthermore, does not liberation theology's understanding of salvation radically sever the decisive correlation between salvation and faith?\(^3\) Articulated within the framework of what can be called a Marxist-Pelagian view of sin and ability, it is the oppressed, 

\(^1\)See Gort, "Gospel for the Poor?" p. 338.  
\(^3\) Like liberation theologians in general, Gutiérrez does not pay enough attention to the Pauline doctrine of justification and its place in a total biblical view of salvation. Greater attention to the Pauline notion of "works of faith" (1 Thess 1:3; 2 Thess 1:11), and "works of law" (Rom 3:20, 28) might be able to provide a view of salvation which does not reduce the need of engagement in the struggle for justice while maintaining the element of grace and the priority of divine initiative (See Knapp, "Preliminary Dialogue," p. 28).
through their own initiative, who "liberate" themselves. Salvation becomes mainly a political act to secure a political utopia. As Braaten remarks, "The kind of salvation liberation theology lifts up generally is something Athens could in principle discover without the help of Jerusalem . . . something which will come about through human praxis without any necessary dependence on God's act in Christ."² There is here the danger of utterly collapsing into the abandonment of the gospel to secularity and the political realm, offering to the poor a salvation that could be provided without reference to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

Liberation theology has positively challenged the individualistic ethic of traditional Christianity. Placing emphasis on the collective nature of sin and salvation, it tries to move Christians and the church from micro-charity to macro-charity. In this effort, however, the impression is given that if the poor have been economically and politically liberated, they will have been liberated

¹Braaten, "The Christian Doctrine of Salvation," pp. 127-128. The dominant connotation of the words "save," "salvation," and "redemption" throughout the New Testament hardly endorses liberationist adoption of a "comprehensive" definition of the concept of salvation, as a something that happens to secular economic and political structures now. Salvation "is something that happens to persons as they are in Christ" (cf. F. Buchsel's discussion of "apolutrosis," TDNT, 4:354; see also Sider, Evangelism, Salvation and Social Justice, chapter 2). In the "New Testament soteria does not refer to earthly relationships. Its content is not, as in the Greek understanding, well-being, health of body and soul. Nor is it the earthly liberation of the people of God from the heathen yoke as in Judaism . . . It has to do solely with man's relationship to God . . . In the New Testament . . . only the events of the historical coming, suffering, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth bring salvation from God's wrath by the forgiveness of sins" (G. Fohrer, "Sozo, soteria, soter, soterios," TDNT, 7:1002).
indeed or at least in the primary and most meaningful sense. In this case, liberation is transformed into a means to accomplish what capitalism has already accomplished elsewhere. This is unfortunate, since "liberation limited to political or economic emancipation is ultimately no liberation at all . . . and in the end its achievement will have accomplished nothing truly righteous and just or genuinely meaningful and durable." Liberation in social, political, and economic terms, as desirable as it is, is only a partial emancipation since it cannot affect the profound causes of human alienation.

An Ecclesiology for Liberation

Side by side with the question of salvation, liberation theologians have dealt with the question of the Church and its mission in contemporary Latin America. Once salvation is understood mainly in its horizontal dimension, the way is open for a concentration of the Church's activity in the sphere of struggle for the political and economic liberation of the poor. In the light of the complicity that has long been exhibited between the institutional Church and the political powers, the image of a church which does not intervene in the temporal order is understood as an idealistic abstraction. The Church must shift sides and "place itself squarely within the process of revolution." The Church of the theologians of liberation can only be understood and have its message made credible

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1Gort, p. 338.
2Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 138.
if its task has the poor and their liberation as the center of concern.¹

Identification with the poor, it should be noted, demands more than simply to experience faith from within their context of socio-economic oppression. It means a radical refusal to accept what exists. Thus, Gutiérrez insists that the Church's mission is defined practically and theoretically, pastorally and theologically in relation to the revolutionary process.² The "revolutionary process" is understood as a concrete and practical effort to change the economic structures of the continent.³ In this process, the Church must become a prophetic denouncer of every unjust situation. But to denounce injustice, it is imperative for the Church to dissociate itself from the established order which perpetuates oppression and to commit itself to the service of the oppressed. Liberation theologians, therefore, provoke the Church to divest itself of the political power and social prestige which it now enjoys

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¹Sobrino, The True Church, p. 120; Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 138.

²Gutierrez, ibid.

³Gutiérrez assigns for theology and the church the task of "rereading history from the perspective of the poor" ("Statement by Gustavo Gutiérrez," p. 310). Explaining himself, he adds: "To reread history means to remake history. The rereading of history from the perspective of the humiliated ... is the result of a commitment and the struggle by entering into what we call the historical praxis of liberation" (ibid). Praxis, understood as "transforming action," is in fact "the action of the poor" (ibid). Social change must be worked out from "bottom up" (A Theology, p. 113), and calls for a church completely bound up with the poor, their aspiration, and struggle (Gutiérrez, "The Praxis of Liberation," p. 397).
and readily cast its lot with the proletariat and its struggle.

This objective, however, remains paradoxical since while liberation theology calls for the Church's surrender of power and prestige at one level, it implies gaining power and prestige among the oppressed, necessarily endangering once again the Church's autonomy. The mission of the Church could thus be severely compromised. Though unwittingly, those who embrace the idea of a church at the service of the materially disposessed in terms of the oppressed/oppressor polarization are essentially committing the same mistake they condemn in the former union of the Church with the rich.

Even if one agrees with Gutiérrez' notion that the Church must be involved in a conscientizing evangelization in an attempt to awaken in oppressed Latin Americans the notion of their dignity as men and as creatures of God, the question remains: what precisely is the Church's responsibility toward those who sustain the unjust structures and who also belong to its constituency? Have not liberation theologians overstressed the role of the oppressed as over against the oppressors? Should not the liberation of oppressor also be a major concern? Can it be said, as liberation theologians

'This is precisely the question raised by Rosemary Ruether. As she says, liberation theologians must remember that "the dehumanization of the oppressor is really their primary problem . . . To the extent that they are not at all concerned about maintaining an authentic prophetic address to the oppressors; to the extent that they repudiate them as persons . . . and conceive of liberation as a mere reversal of this relationship . . . they both abort their possibilities as a liberating force for the oppressor, and ultimately, derail their own power to liberate themselves. What this means is that one cannot dehumanize the oppressors without ultimately dehumanizing oneself, and aborting the possibilities of the
suggest, that to be save the rich need only to become materially poor? How can the Church in its "option for the poor" in terms of class struggle live up the Christian impossibility of sacralizing and absolutizing politics? How can liberation theology within such an exclusivist option, identify with the salvation of God's kingdom for all, since this kingdom knows no historically chosen social class as the sole bearers of universal salvation? In Schillebeeckx's terms, "can the church legitimately participate in the cause of the poor and oppressed if it takes a definite position in the class struggle?"  

Gutiérrez sees as the first pastoral task of the Church to celebrate, through the Eucharist, the brotherhood and liberation secured by God's saving work in Jesus. Since in Latin America both oppressors and oppressed share in the same celebration, his understanding of the Eucharist raises a crucial issue: "Without a real commitment against exploitation and alienation and for a society of solidarity and justice, the Eucharistic celebration is an empty action." Gutiérrez' insight is a valid one, but he provides no

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lucrative movement into an exchange of roles of oppressor and oppressed" (Liberation Theology, p. 13).

1At Medellín, while the Bishops spoke of "Pastoral Care of the Masses" (The Church in the Present-day, pp. 90-95), they also referred to "Pastoral Concern for the Elites" (ibid., pp. 98-105), showing clear perception of the church's responsibility for all social groups. In the case of the theologians of liberation, it seems that the Christian's responsibility with the oppressors ends with the combat waged against them.

1Schillebeeckx, "Liberation Theology," p. 7.

2Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 265; see above, p. 173.
suggestion as to how the Church might make its Eucharistic celebration a symbol of genuine unity in a radically divided world. He limits himself to affirm that "unity of the church is not truly achieved without the unity of the world."\(^1\) Does it mean that an idealist unity at the level of material possessions will secure unity within the church? Shall the Christian celebration wait for the ideal world unity or should the dilemma be resolved by preventing the oppressors from participation in the Eucharistic feast, thus transforming it into a celebration among militants?\(^2\) The notion of liberation theology on the unity of the Church, reduced to a mere expression of human reality, is superficial and falls short of Paul's vision of the church, where in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female" (3:28).

The analysis of the liberationist's ecclesiological thought reveals further difficulties. In their attempt to enlist the Church as an instrument of change, liberation theologians tend to understand it in terms of the world and to judge its validity in terms of effectiveness and social impact in the transformation of society. Within this functional vision of the church, the ecclesia, is basically conceived as one more power block following all governing

\(^1\)Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 278.

\(^2\)It is appropriate here to recall that at the Last Supper "unity" was hardly an existent reality as evidenced by the presence of a traitor (John 13:18-30), the questions of Thomas and Philip (John 14:5-9), the dispute over rank (Luke 22:24-27), and the prophecy of Peter's denial (Luke 22:31-34).
social organizations.¹ Where then, one is tempted to ask, is the significance of the Church and where does its essential nature lie? While on the one hand Gutiérrez affirms that the Church must be "seen in terms of the world,"² on the other he considers it as the sign of a reality beyond the grasp of the world.³ But where does the validity of that sign rest? Is it in the fact that the world seems to appreciate now the utilitarian value of the Church, or is this value intrinsic to the sign regardless of what any particular historical moment may think?⁴

¹This understanding, however, pays little attention to the Church's invisible and divine reality. Liberation theologians leave out the dual nature of the Church as sustained by traditional Christianity. See Lumen Gentium's emphasis on the spiritual dimension of the church (Art 8, in Abbott, pp. 22-24). They tend to minimize those realities in the Church which reach beyond the limitations of human institutions and accomplishment. Stressing the importance of the Church's presence in the process of structural changes in Latin American, should not liberation theology give attention to the call to conversion and holiness that the church makes to men? Or is the the force of the church to be found only in sustaining the class struggle?

²Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 67.

³Ibid., pp. 258-262.

⁴Going one step further, we must stress that if the sign is of intrinsic value, then the Church hardly can be evaluated in terms of the world's standards, and liberation theology faces here the challenge of an unresolved paradox. The efficacy of a sign, as Herrera observes, is dependent on the belief that those who uphold the sign have placed on it, rather than on the value that outsiders may attribute to it (Man and the Latin American Church, p. 254). That being the case, while for the believers, the Church may be a sign of salvation, for the world it may be only a sign of contradiction, as in the case of Jesus and the cross. Hence, how can the Church be seen in "terms of the world," when the world naturally cannot discern the meaning in the reality that the church as a sign points to?
Liberation theologians correctly call the Church to take social realities seriously. Yet they assign to the Church a role in society in such a way that it discharges its social responsibility more in terms set by the world than those found in the gospel. According to Gutiérrez, the Church-world frontiers are fluid to the extent that many committed Christians--joining forces with various secular groups committed to the social revolution--make no distinction between working for the kingdom and working for the social revolution. How far can the Church be engaged in political activism and class struggle and still be faithful to its divine calling for a ministry of reconciliation? Can it represent the new aeon while fighting with the weapons of the old? Whereas we must be fully aware of the dangerous tendency toward traditional theological dualism, liberation theology's drift toward historical monism is not a satisfactory exchange. Its propensity to syncretism and universalism is particularly distorting to the gospel. Obliterating the distinction between the church and the world, liberation theology ends up identifying the purpose of God with the present historical situation. Such an identification, however, has no biblical foundation. On the contrary, the New Testament authors constantly contradict this notion by insisting on the distinction between the Church and the world, between light and darkness, between those who are in Christ and those who are not (cf. John 1:12-13; 3:6; 8:12; 17:15-16; 2 Cor 5:17; 6:14-15; Eph 2:1-10).

1Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 72.
Liberation theologians attempt to pattern their ecclesiology after their understanding of Christology. A Christian perception of the church, Gutiérrez insists, must begin with Christology. Since *ubi Christus ibi ecclesia*, Jesus' identification with the poor makes the place where the poor stand normative for what the true Church is and is to be. This leaves no alternative for the church: either it will be the church of the poor or it will not be the church at all. Although the insight has a legitimate and powerful claim, liberation theology, dominated by its one-sided vision of the

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1Gutiérrez. The Power of the Poor, p. 210. There has been in recent Catholic as well as Protestant theological thought a renewed emphasis on Christology as the paradigm for ecclesiology. See Henry de Lubac, Catholicism (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), p. 29; Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*, art. 8; Dulles, Models of the Church, pp. 95-108; R. Adolfs, The Grave of God: Has the Church a Future? (London: Burns & Oats, 1967), pp. 109-117; Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit, pp. 121-131. Central to liberation theologians' approach to Christology, however, is the endeavor to restate traditional Christological formulations and to bring Christology itself under the criterion of praxis. As one might expect, liberation theology is not concerned about analyzing Jesus' dual nature as God and man, divine personhood, his hypostatic union, etc., which are considered as abstract speculations. It is the flesh-and-blood Jesus of history who is of fundamental importance to Latin theologians. They focus almost exclusively on the liberative activity of the historical Jesus (see especially Boff, Jesus Christ Liberator; Sobrino, Christology at the Crossroads). In their effort to replace the "dead Christ" of Latin American piety with the "historical Jesus" and set a new paradigm for the life of the Church, liberation theologians run the risk of putting him to direct and immediate ideological use, reducing Christ to a political liberator (for helpful discussion of liberationist Christology, see Gerald O'Collins, What Are They Saying about Jesus? [New York: Paulist Press, 1983], pp. 51-63; Clark M. Williamson, "Christ Against the Jews: A Review of Jon Sobrino's Christology," Encount 40 [1978]: 403-412; Dan Cohn-Sherbok, "Jesus the Jew and Liberation Theology," The Month, [March, 1984], 82-84; Brian Mullandy, "An Analysis of Christology in Liberation Theology," 438-459).
poor, tends to place the correct theological proposition in a wrong framework. Two questions here are of crucial significance. First what kind of option did Jesus manifest for the poor? Second, who were these poor to whom Jesus manifested special sympathy? At this point we limit ourselves to a few basic observations, leaving a more elaborate discussion for a later section of this study.

In the light of the witness of the gospels it seems indisputable that Jesus' teaching and deeds, fulfilling the Old Testament pronouncements concerning God's saving actions, were liberating and marked by an "option for the poor." In striking fashion, Jesus seeks out the sick, the lowly, sinners, women, children, the despised, foreigners, the outcast. It is not that he merely tolerated such people; he deliberately chose to associate himself with them. He encouraged them to feel at home with him, giving the impression that he not only liked their company, but in fact preferred it. Liberation theologians correctly stress that Jesus' vision of solidarity with the poor and oppressed resulted in a praxis unacceptable to the powers of his time. They seem to overlook, however, that his

1The portrayal of Jesus' ministry in the Synoptic Gospels touches often upon his fellowship with the lowly and the outcast. The world of ordinary, despised and poor people of his society is the backdrop to his activity. What is special about or common to the people Jesus specially ministered to? They all "lacked" something: health, opportunities in life, prestige before the "righteous," capabilities, acceptance among the Jews. They were all marginalized. There is, in fact, something grand in Jesus' decision to go to those whom the socioreligious Jewish system scrupulously excluded and judged unworthy. It is precisely Jesus' option for the outcast and despised that was the seed of the Gospel as the "Good News."
preference for the outcast issued from something deeper, namely "his primary mission to gather together all Israel." ¹

Liberationist Christological formulation which tends to transform Jesus primarily into a historical liberator in the economic and political sphere proclaiming a gospel partisan to the materially poor hardly finds much biblical support. Since the kingdom is universal, Jesus' option for the poor does not constitute the founding of a party of the poor in opposition to the wealthy. The rich are not cursed but rather invited to conversion (Luke 18:18-22; 19:1-10).² Furthermore, the fact that in Jesus' time it was possible to be materially well-to-do and yet an outcast of society³ must make one cautious about making too easy and exclusive an identification between "the poor" to whom Jesus was partisan with the economically deprived.

Jesus' message and "option for the poor" transcends social classes and ideological alignments. At no point does he urge collective action or set up a program. His sole emphasis is on individual acts of generosity and love.⁴ He does not even explicitly

¹Schillebeeckx, "Liberation Theology," p. 6
²Luke gives special attention to Jesus' contacts with people of adequate to quite substantial means. We think of the fishermen (5:2ff), the centurion (7:2ff), Jairus (8:41ff), Mary and Martha (10:38-42), and women like the wife of Herod's steward who provided for Jesus and his disciples (8:3). His favourites are the tax-collectors (Luke 3:12, 5:27; 7:29; 15:1ff; 19:1ff).
³That was particularly the case of the tax-collectors. See below, pp. 372-375.
⁴Although Jesus indisputably called men to renunciation of
contend for the material interests of the poor and oppressed and whenever he advocates social action, it is the salvation of the giver, not the material advantage of the receiver that is his explicit concern. The challenges he posed to the rich did not call for social revolution but for discipleship.

analysis, liberation theology seems to conceive the "Church of the poor" as the church of a specific revolutionary class,\(^1\) the church of the oppressed whom it is necessary to conscientize in the light of the organized struggle for liberation. The church's "option for the poor"\(^2\) is, in fact, an option for the proletariat, in terms of class struggle,\(^3\) and framed within the conflictive dialectic involved in

\(\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\)As we discussed earlier, the notion of the "church of the poor" first emerged by the time of Vatican II. After the Medellín conference the theologians of liberation took on the ecclesiological theme of Christ's unity with the poor. But departing from the Council's emphasis, they insist that the concept of the poor is not to be perceived subjectively through charity nor theologically in the conception of the "suffering Christ," but, through Marxist socio-economic analysis, as class, oppressed and exploited (Míguez Bonino, "Ecclesia Pauper," pp. 139-141). The "Church of the Poor," or the "Church of the People," then, tends to be conceived primarily as a church of one class. To avoid the use of the term "people" as an all-inclusive social and political entity beyond class differences and conflictive dialectic (P. Richard, "The Latin American Church," p. 44), or Vatican II's "abstract" reference to the Church as the "People of God," liberation theologians affirm that, "When we speak of a Church of the People, we must be careful to make it clear that we are not giving the phrase universalist meaning... For us, the term 'people' is historically connected with the exploited sectors within dependent capitalist system, such as the one we are now the victims of in Latin America" (R. Vidales, "Evangelización y liberación popular," in Liberación y cautiverio, p. 223; cf. L. Boff, "Theological Characteristics of a Grassroots Church," p. 134).

\(\text{\textsuperscript{2}}\)It should be noted that while the conferences of Medellín and Puebla implicitly and explicitly referred to a "preferential option for the poor," there was no suggestion to opt for struggle against the oppressors as liberation theologians suggest (see The Church in the Present-Day Transformation, pp. 172-179; Puebla's "Final Document," in Puebla and Beyond, Nos. 114-116. For a helpful treatment of an "option for the poor" based on Puebla and on Pope John Paul's addresses in Mexico, see Ricardo Antonich, Los Cristianos ante la Injusticia: Hacia una lectura latinoamericana de la doctrina social de la Iglesia [Bogota: Ediciones Grupo Social, 1980], pp. 108-115).

\(\text{\textsuperscript{3}}\)For Gutiérrez to opt for the poor can only mean to combat the oppressive class (A Theology, pp. 276, 301; "The Praxis of
the conception of poverty which revolves around the axis oppressed/oppressor. This particularism based on a one-sided way of defining the poor—which selectively acknowledges them as those who conform to the theoretical exigences of ideological demands—virtually eliminates the Christological basis liberation theologians want to give to their understanding of the Church. How shall we maintain the theological notion ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia and at the same time tie the Church to one social class? Are we supposed to assume that Jesus employed for his identification with the poor the

Liberation," p. 382), and here there is no neutral ground for the Church (ibid., p. 275). Although one may find examples of radical positions regarding violence, Hans Küng's criticism implying that liberation theologians promote a "theological glorification of violence" (On Being a Christian, p. 570), or René Visme Williamson's affirmation that violence plays "a major role" in liberation theology, however, are oversimplifications that ignore the complexity of the Latin arguments. As Coon remarks, it is not violence per se that is advocated. It is rather a question of what is being opposed, namely, the institutionalized violence, the "first violence" attributed to the power structure ("Theologies of Liberation: Toward a Common View," p. 403). It seems that as far as violence is concerned, the major criticism to Gutiérrez is the vagueness in which he deals with the issue. Even though he is clear as to the impossibility of neutrality or compromises that hinder total alignment with the oppressed and total rejection of the oppressors, he is unclear as to how the Christian or the Church can carry on the class struggle. He talks about "radical combat" as the only way to show love for one's enemies, but we are in the dark as to what kind of combat he has in mind or in what its radicalness consists. Idealistically Gutiérrez says that the question is not "having no enemies, but rather of not excluding them from our love," therefore the struggle "must be a real and effective combat, not hate" (ibid., p. 276). The question remains, however, as to whether it is realistic to envision class struggle without exacerbation of hate, violence, resentment and rivalries. As "Che" Guevara, a hero of Latin American revolutionaries, wrote, "hatred is a factor in struggle . . . a people that does not hate cannot triumph over a brutal enemy" (cf. Kloppenburg, The People's Church, p. 179).
same "scientific social analysis" that the theologians of liberation have adopted?¹

On the other hand, liberation theologians overstate their case when they seek to give an ontological basis to Jesus' identification with the poor. This emphasis ultimately results on a questionable externalization in which the poor, based in their social condition, are automatically included in the Church. Can we legitimately affirm that poor and oppressed qua poor and oppressed are the "true church" as liberation theologians suggest?² Or that the poor, because of their external socioeconomic condition, are crypto Christians, a "second brotherhood," to be automatically transformed into the "People of God?" Is not that kind of externalization precisely what liberation theologians criticize in the "Christendom mentality," in which external characteristics were taken as the grounds for a spiritual reality?

¹As Kloppenburg notes, five elements are required for the concept of "poor/people," as understood in relation to liberationist notion of the "Church of the Poor." The "poor" or "people" must share: (1) material poverty; (2) objective oppression by capitalism; (3) consciousness of the oppression; (4) struggle against the oppressors aiming at liberation; and (5) carrying on the struggle in the radical form of class struggle (The People's Church, pp. 38-39).

²Although we deal with exegesis later, it seems appropriate at this point to give attention to liberation theologians' interpretation of Matt 25:31-46, a crucial text for the notion of the "church of the poor." As we noticed earlier, liberation theologians, on the basis of ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia and in association with a particular understanding of Jesus' identification with the "least of the brethren" of Matt 25:31-46, conclude that the poor, "wherever and whoever they are," form a second brotherhood of the church outside of the believing community (see above p.170, n. 1; cf. Gutiérrez' exegesis of Matt 25:31-46, A Theology, pp. 197-203). The liberationist ecclesiological interpretation of Matt 25:31-46
The Church of the Poor and the Danger of Sectarianism

In contrast with the traditional alliance of the Latin American Roman Catholic Church with the rich elites, liberation theology convokes a "Church of the People." It correctly insists that preference must be given to the poor, as the gospel itself commands. By their very definition of the poor, however, liberation theologians, at least at the theoretical level, link the Church exclusively to one group-class. The liberationist "option for the poor" tends to limit the universality of the Church and compromise its offer of salvation to all in a way which transforms the ecclesia (except for the Marxist identification of the poor) coincides in almost every detail with Moltmann's exegesis of this text (see The Church in the Power of the Spirit, pp. 121-132). Martin R. Tripole, however, challenges the notion that the "least of these brethren" is equal to the poor of the world in general (see "A Church for the Poor and the World: at Issue with Moltmann's Ecclesiology," ThSt 42 [1981]:645-659). Tripole raises two main objections to this RTND of exegesis: First, as indicated by the immediate and larger contexts, Jesus' discourse is addressed to his disciples (see Matt 24:1 to 26:1); second, with remarkable consistency in Matthew's gospel, the references to "little ones" or "least brethren" are references not to needy people, in general, but to believers (see Matt 11:11; 10:42; 18:6; 12:4-50; 5:47; 23:8; 28:10; cf. W. D. Davies, The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount [London: Cambridge University Press, 1966], p. 98). Thus, in 25:31-46, rather than making exceptional use of these terms, Jesus is referring to his own disciples in mission activity. The "least brethren" mentioned in Matt 25:31-46 "are disciples of Jesus and anyone from among the nations of the world who takes care of their needs as they carry out their discipleship is serving Jesus and thereby performing a service to God (pp. 649-659). To use the text for drawing up a "second brotherhood" of the church outside the community of believers violates the text by eisegesis. The text would therefore "not be relevant to the discussion of the entirely different matter of Christian service of the needs of the poor in general" (p. 650). For a list of modern exegetes who concur with this conclusion, see Tripole, pp. 650-651; and particularly Lamar Cope, "Matthew 25:31-46, 'The Sheep and the Goats' Reinterpreted," NovTest 11 [1969]:32-44).
into a partisan political faction. As Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar notes, the Church cannot "célebrer l'Eucharistie uniquement avec ceux qui sont matériellement pauvres, limiter son unité catholique au 'parti' des pauvres, autrement dit ne vouloir l'étendre à tous les hommes qu'après une 'lutte des classes' victorieuse."\(^1\)

While Vatican II understood the expression "People of God" as meaning all those who are fully incorporated in the Catholic Church,\(^2\) for liberation theology the "People of God" are the poor and oppressed within the basic ecclesial communities, those whose consciousness has been raised. From the identification of the "People of God" with the popular church emerges the ecclesiological tensions between the Church and the basic communities.\(^3\) As Chilean theologian Pablo Richard acknowledges, there is a risk of sectarianism in identifying "the People of God" with the oppressed: "The popular church . . . being the church of and for the poor would have a character of a sect, contrary to the universal character and mission of the church."\(^4\) Yet he ultimately rejects this risk as "abstract and ideological,"\(^5\) explaining that it involves an "ecclesiological

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\(^2\) See Lumen Gentium, art. 13, 14.

\(^3\) See above, p. 182, n. 1.


\(^5\) Ibid.
contradiction." Like liberation theologians in general, Richard optimistically hopes that the basic ecclesial communities will succeed in winning the masses\(^1\) to the cause of Christ the Liberator, overcoming the present "political contradiction," so that the Catholic Church may become in truth the "People of God." The logic of this notion is that the universal destiny of the basic communities outweigh their present sectarian tendencies. Sobrino, more complex in his theological defense of the catholicity of the Church of the poor, seems to ground the catholicity of the partisanship with the oppressed in its already-present capacity to create universal Christian and human solidarity.\(^2\) In the light of these aspirations, the theologians of liberation tend to minimize the consequences of the marginalization for the basic communities and their theology.\(^3\)

Liberation theologians, however, fail to recognize that the sectarian risk faced by the ecclesia pauperum is not based on the

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\(^1\)Richard appeals to "the judgement of Christ against all sin, oppression or alienation," and hopes that "the church which rises from the people calls together the whole of humanity" ("The Latin American Church," pp. 42-43; cf. Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 262-279). Less evasive than the good intentions of Richard and Gutiérrez, Segundo in his emphasis on a minority church composed of elite-communities of historical engagement (The Liberation of Theology, p. 210; cf. Persha, Juan Luis Segundo, pp. 99-214), more openly recognizes the sectarian character of the basic communities, even though, denouncing as "verbal terrorism" the language that enforces the pejorative meaning traditionally attached to the term "sect" (ibid., p. 185), he attempts to give to "sectarianism" a new positive content.


\(^3\)See MaCann, Christian Realism, p. 214.
"political contradiction," as Richard argues, but on the special and elitist ecclesiological function that the theology of liberation assigns to the poor and oppressed classes. In the popular Church, it is important to note, the poor are not regarded as the object either of evangelization or of the Church's preferential love, as stated by Puebla,¹ but as the "subjects who evangelize and build up the church."² In fact, as "the privileged recipients of the Good News,"³ not only are considerable attributes assigned to the poor but they are above all enlisted to perform many wonderful ecclesial feats. Sobrino contends that the poor constitute the true Church, the structural channel for the experience of God, which in its character as channel is normative.⁴

To affirm that the poor are "subjects who evangelize," or the "special bearers of the Christian message" in the context of a "conscientizing evangelization" can only mean that the poor are "a chosen people" within the Church as a whole. Since the poor are defined as the oppressed locked in a class struggle with their oppressors, to make of them a "chosen people" means ascribing to them a certain cognitive and moral privilege simply on the basis of their

³Sobrino, The True Church, p. 121.
⁴Ibid., pp. 121-124.
class status.¹ This is the "concrete meaning" proposed by liberation theologians for "The People of God." It is they who determine not only the agenda of the Church for social justice and peace but also the very definition of the Church and its membership.

In making explicit the concrete meaning of "the People of God," liberation theologians are following through on the logic of conscientization whose end-product is an elite marked by a cognitive privilege from the perspective of the poor. But is this not precisely an example of sectarianism, when viewed from the perspective of Roman Catholic ecclesiology? As McCann observes, in the hierarchical-institutional Church, the bishops are the "subjects who evangelize" in virtue of their sacramental ordination. No special privilege in this matter is granted to any social class. While Catholic ecclesiology does not rule out the participation of the Church in the struggles of oppressed peoples, it does not place the poor, defined as a social class, in a position to determine either the Church's agenda or its membership. If the poor are "the subjects who evangelize," or a "new magisterium" in the ecclesiological sense proposed by the theologians of liberation, it becomes more difficult to save the basic communities from being regarded as sectarian in character.²

¹This is precisely what Assmann calls "the epistemological privilege of the poor" (Statement by Hugo Assmann, p. 300). Their epistemology, i.e., their way of knowing, as McAfee Brown insists, is accurate to a degree that is impossible for those who see the world only from the vantage point of privilege they want to retain (Theology in a New Key, p. 61).

²See McCann, Christian Realism, pp. 215-216.
Since the church has a vital role to play in God's design for the liberation of the poor, it needs to use biblical hermeneutics as one tool within its revolutionary commitment to the oppressed. As Segundo underlines, the Christian community should unceasingly be about the work of creatively translating and interpreting the message in different circumstances in terms of the problems that are posed today by human beings who are subjects of history.¹

Within this vision, as we have indicated earlier, liberation theologians propose a rereading of the Bible from the perspective of the poor and their struggles for liberation. In this last section we devote particular attention to the liberationist use of Scripture in their theological formulations and how their prior commitment to the Marxist class analysis of society, held as the indispensable pre-understanding of Scripture, tends to put the biblical notion of the poor within what appears to be an hermeneutical straightjacket. In this final part of our study, after some preliminary considerations regarding the hermeneutical approach of liberation theology, we attempt to assess its interpretation of the poor in Scripture in relation to the biblical data. We start with an brief analysis of the Exodus. The focus, then, moves to the poor-terminology in the Old Testament, and finally the attention is turned to the poor in the

Gospel of Luke, which provides the basis for much of the claims of the Latin American radical theology of the poor.

Liberation Theology's Rereading of the Bible

Assuming that theology is not only the "second act," following the first act of praxis,\(^1\) but that it is also the "second word" following the first word of the social sciences,\(^2\) liberation theologians, consistent with their praxiological methodology, assign from the outset a secondary place to the Bible in their system. Since the historical situation is the normative element, Scripture becomes a supportive frame of reference without determinative or normative function. Re-reading the biblical text in the light of a previous ideological commitment to change social reality, unavoidably determines liberation theology's understanding of Scripture. It affects not only its approach to the content of the biblical message (i.e., preference is given to certain biblical themes with parallel omission to those themes which are not considered directly relevant to current issues)\(^3\) but also its hermeneutical procedure (i.e., the

\(^1\)Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 11.


\(^3\)It should be noted that since the aim is not the formulation of theology per se, but the articulation of a liberating theology, which will necessarily be partial, liberationist hermeneutics, thus, is marked by a strong tendency to create a "canon within a canon" (Knapp, "Preliminary Dialogue," p. 22), and "a political twist" in the reading of the Bible (Clark H. Pinnock, "Liberation Theology: The Gain, the Gaps," ChrT 20 [1975]:391).
biblical text is understood from the vantage-point or praxis).

Thus doing, liberation theologians run the risk, on the one hand, of creating a neo-Marcionite approach to Scripture by which only certain parts are selected as an acceptable, authentic witness to God's revelation today. On the other hand, they risk adopting a neo-Alexandrine hermeneutical practice which uses the text in a basically uncontrolled paradigmatic, figurative, and inspirational fashion. In both cases, the impression is given that the Bible is being used to sustain positions developed outside its orbit.¹

Liberation theology challenges as an illusion the claim of objectivity made by traditional hermeneutics which is marked by the underlying idea that theologians come to Scripture with no presuppositions and thus can deliver an indisputable verdict on what the Bible means. On the contrary, wearing the lens of its own culture, society, and political background, traditional reading of the Bible rising from the affluent world is culturally determined and ends up being an ideology which sanctions political ideas. However, while accusing traditional biblical interpretation as ideological, liberationist hermeneutics is not without its own ideological slant.

Under the influence of subtler forms of captivity, it makes the equal mistake of the scholars it wishes to refute, appearing thus equally incapable of hearing the text's message.¹

The Latin theologians are unquestionably right in their point that no one can be absolutely objective when interpreting the Bible. At this point they have called attention to a crucial hermeneutical question. Problems arise, however, when they give the impression that objectivity is not worth striving for. Because the attempt to be objective enhances the capacity of being self-critical, it should not be easily dismissed. While one may have no illusions about the absolute objectivity that can be sustained in any discipline, the integrity of a discipline depends in part upon a serious effort to maintain some critical distance from any form of advocacy. Interpreters of the Bible, in particular, have a moral obligation to be faithful to the intentionality of the text, internally defined. No matter how just or pressing the cause of the

¹One may accept the liberationist materialist reading of the Bible as a critical supplement to the traditionally accepted form of exegesis which has paid little attention to the material situation, the social, political, and economic setting, the Sitz im Leben, in which the biblical texts came about. Still liberation theologians' radical dismissal of all previous exegesis as "bourgeois" and parallel claim that only the method of historical materialism can legitimately be applied to every passage in Scripture, must be objected to as too restrictive. See, for example, Fernando Belo's Marxist analysis of the gospel of Mark, A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981), which in fact, as Schillebeeckx notes, is an anachronic Markan interpretation of Marx (God is New Each Moment [New York: Seabury Press, 1983], pp. 96-97). Another clear example of liberationist's hermeneutical dogmatism can be seen in their approach to the familiar crux interpretum of Exod 3:14 'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh (see Kirk "The Bible in Latin American Liberation," p. 163).
poor, the meaning of a text should not be twisted or stretched by a less likely interpretation selected to support that cause.

Although we must admit that to a greater or lesser extent much of traditional interpretation of the Bible has been conditioned by the affluent Western world which has forged a "rich" understanding of God's word, the answer is not to balance a possible one-sided societal interpretation by stressing another equally one-sided societal interpretation. The kind of repentance that the classic reading of the Bible needs is not to turn to a "poor" interpretation of Scripture, as liberation theologians suggest. True "theological repentance" must acknowledge that although biblical theology is situation-related, it should not be situation-bound. Theologians must attempt to make God's word relevant for their context, but, by the same token, they must also make a genuine effort to overcome their "ideological capitivity." This holds true no less for liberation theologians than for "academic" theologians. Only then will theology be able to distinguish the voice of its own culture from that of a sovereign God speaking in an authoritative Bible.

The Poor as Hermeneutical Key

Since objective exegesis is regarded as of little value for a faith committed to the praxis of liberation, Latin American theologians of liberation assume that a creative interpretation of the Bible involves the adoption of a clear ideological instance, a partiality that is consciously accepted, a once-for-all "option for the poor" and oppressed. The poor, a sociological fact as defined by
the dialectic of history, become thus not only the center of theological reflection, but as Gutierrez says, the hermeneutical key "to an understanding . . . of the meaning of the revelation of a liberating God." Their lives, experiences, and struggles become the sole hermeneutical criterion to interpret the biblical text.

Markedly under the influence of the Marxist perspective on the social context of knowledge which envisions the experience of the oppressed as a privileged medium of truth, liberation theologians assert the hermeneutical privilege of the poor. The underlying idea is that the struggling poor are better prepared to perceive reality and the world today. Furthermore, since they are closer to the situation of the biblical writers who wrote their message "out of the experience of oppressed people for the liberation of oppressed people," the poor's understanding of the Bible is regarded as more accurate. According to Pablo Richard:

The poor are the only legitimate interpreters of the biblical text, since that text belongs to the historical memory of the poor. The poor are the human authors of the Bible. The entire Bible has been produced by the poor or from the

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2 The notion of the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed, as Lee Cormie notes, is at the heart of the Marxist perspective and is evident in the practice of most Marxist movements ("The Hermeneutical Privilege of the Oppressed," pp. 168-181).


perspective of the poor, which allows them and only them to provide the key to its interpretation.

Although liberation theology's compelling invitation to a new reading of Scripture "from the underside of history" poses a positive call for transcendence over traditional class and cultural hermeneutical imprisonment, such an invitation is also marked by a latent romanticizing which liberation theologians seem to have about the "underside of history." Even conceding that there is a fundamental truth in the notion that the Bible was written from the perspective of the poor, to reduce the biblical writers to the category of "oppressed writing to the liberation of the oppressed," or to understand the context of the revelatory events near-exclusively in socio-political terms,\(^2\) seems to be a complete


\(^2\)While traditional exegesis has generally been marked by a complete abstraction from the social background of the biblical passages (see, for example L. E. Kick's criticism of Bultmann, "On the Ethos of Early Christians," JAAR 42 [1974]:439; cf. J. Z. Smith, "The Sociological Description of Early Christianity," RStR 1 [1975]:19), contemporary efforts--mainly stemming from the historical-critical method--to relate the socioeconomic and political context and theological content in biblical studies, tends to minimize the witness of the biblical text to the transcendent dimension in historical reality (cf. Norman K. Gottwald and Frank S. Frick, "The Social World of Ancient Israel," in The Bible and Liberation, pp. 110-119; N. K. Gottwald, "Biblical Theology or Biblical Sociology?" pp. 42-57; J. Dus, "Moses or Joshua," pp. 26-41; G. Theisen, Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978]. See also Cormie "The Hermeneutical Privilege of the Oppressed," pp. 168-181). One can, however, apply all the exegetical instruments available from historical, linguistic, and sociopolitical research and never reach the complete meaning of the text unless one recognizes a transcendent or divine dimension in biblical history, and yields to the basic experience out of which the biblical writers speak, namely faith.
capitulation to Marxist interpretation of all "written history" as "the history of class struggles." It also seems to read into the text too much of modern concerns and conditionings. This notion tends to limit the ultimate origin and purpose of the biblical message, which "is certainly for the liberation of the oppressed, but also for the liberation of the oppressors, in fact for everyone, regardless of their status or condition."

At this point one is tempted to ask whether it is not idealistic to take one social grouping and claim that the experience of this group should provide the exclusive hermeneutical key to all. Can it legitimately be said that the only valid interpretation of the biblical message is the prerogative of one social class? Furthermore, one wonders on what basis the motif of liberation is elevated to the absolute status of the central biblical category and transformed into the hermeneutical criterion to understand the whole Scripture, overshadowing other biblical themes and the longitudinal perspective of biblical testimonies. Liberation theologians give the definite impression that their choice of the poor and of their struggles for

1Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto, p. 2. This notion seems to be accepted by liberation theologians as a sine qua non of correct ideological stance in respect to both the understanding of modern society and the interpreting of God's word (Kirk, "The Bible in Latin American Liberation Theology," p 164).

2George Landes, "Creation and Liberation," UnionSQR 33 (1978): 83. In this connection, one must keep in mind that much of the Old Testament was produced in the context of the royal court and the religious establishment, whom we would hardly identify with the "oppressed." The same can be said of the wisdom literature where we encounter a broader base of experience than that coming solely from conditions of oppression (Landes, ibid).
liberation as a hermeneutical key is made arbitrarily, built upon an ideological basis.

Although one may agree with Gutiérrez that reading the Bible from the perspective of the poor will open one's eyes to nuances of the biblical text that had long been missed, the opposite is also true. Such an approach may lead one to read this perspective and its interests into Scripture (eisegesis) when it is not there, while missing other themes and perspectives, or misconceive the actual nature of the Bible's own understanding of the poor and their liberation, which may differ from the one which is brought to the text by a political pre-commitment.

Since no single theme, scheme, or motif seems sufficiently comprehensive to embrace all the varieties of biblical viewpoints, commitment to the liberation of the poor can hardly be transformed into the exclusive theme or the organizing principle intended to understand the whole of the biblical message. One unilineal concept should not be taken as the ultimate paradigm to which all biblical testimonies, thoughts, and concepts are made to refer or are forced to

1 Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 49.

2 As J. Goldingay remarks theologians of liberation "are as much in danger as anyone else of seeing their own face at the bottom of the hermeneutical well." "The Hermeneutics of Liberation Theology," HorizonsBibTh 4 (1982):140.

3 Gerhard Hasel pointedly warns against the temptation of finding the unity of Scripture in one structuring theme, an approach which tends to reduce biblical theology to a cross-sectional or other development of a single concept, losing sight of the essential nature of the biblical content. Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 140-143.
Liberation theologians overstate their case transforming the poor into the hermeneutical master key to unfold Scripture. Although concern for the poor is unquestionably a central motif within the biblical horizon, it hardly means that today's concern for the liberation of the oppressed is the overarching theme that covers the whole biblical message.¹

Is God on the Side of the Poor?

According to Gutiérrez, there are two central intuitions to liberation theology: one methodological and the other its frame of reference. While the former maintains that active commitment to liberation comes first and theology develops from it, the latter stresses that God, as a liberating God, unconditionally takes the side of the poor.² Ronald Sider sums up this basic notion, underlining that at the central theological foundation of liberation theology's attempt to rethink theology from the standpoint of the poor "is the thesis that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed."³

¹According to M. Manzane'a, "The Bible can be explained and understood only with this hermeneutics of liberation"; every other interpretation "is in its very roots a secret siding with the status quo ("Die Theologie der Befreiung in Lateinamerika," Theologische Akademie 12 [1975]:50, 61; cf. Balthasar, "Liberation Theology," p. 132). If everything in the Bible were to be traced back to liberation, revelation would suffer a drastic contraction. Furthermore, if liberation is the essence of the gospel, one wonders what theology will have to say when or where there are no poor to liberate. God's word, however, embraces the complex range of human reality which certainly cannot be covered by the rubric of liberation alone.


How biblical is the view that God is biased in favor of the poor and oppressed? The idea that God shows special concern for the defenseless in society is unquestionably rooted in solid biblical ground. Yahweh's care and love for the poor and his revelation as a God who is the compassionate and vindicator of the oppressed, are recurring themes in the Old Testament. The psalmists, the wisdom literature and the prophets make unmistakably clear Yahweh's concern

Although the protection of widows, orphans, and the poor was common policy in the ancient Near East (see F. Charles Fensham, "Widow, Orphan and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature," JNearEastS 21 [1962]:129-139), the concept of divine care for the poor is found nowhere else to the same degree in the religious literature of the ancient world as it is in the Old Testament (Walter Pilgrim, Good News to the Poor pp. 20-21). While in polytheistic religions of the ancient Near East the protection of the poor is ascribed to a special god in the pantheon (Fensham, pp. 129-134), in the Old Testament Yahweh is described as the protector par excellence of the weak. His concern for the poor is not grounded in an ideal to promote social harmony, but rooted in the nature of Yahweh himself (see E. Berkovits, "The Biblical Meaning of Justice," Judaism 18 [1968]:188-209; H. Snaith, The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament [London: Epworth Press, 1957], pp. 68-78).


The poor occupy a special place in the Psalter. In a variety of ways, Yahweh is portrayed as the One who extends his hand of...
for the poor. In the same tradition, the New Testament writers are explicit in their witness to God's compassion for the underdog, as supremely revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus. Furthermore, the paradox of strength made manifest in weakness is one of the cornerstones of the Christian faith, a faith born of a minority of nomadic Semites and nurtured by generations of the oppressed. The Judeo-Christian tradition is, to a great extent, rooted in the conviction that God upholds the dignity of the downtrodden and exalts the lowly.

In a special sense, therefore, liberation theology's emphasis that God is on the side of the poor grows out of an element of the


1See above, pp. 305; for bibliography on this rich subject, see above, pp. 122-123.

Bible which is not only clearly present but almost omnipresent there. Difficulties, however, emerge with the ambiguities inherent in the liberationist formulation of the theological thesis and from the implications that liberation theologians draw from it. First of all, the idea of such a divine bias—so insistently defended by liberation theology—can itself become a tool of oppression. Over-emphasizing God's favor toward the poor may easily end in the canonization of poverty, thus neutralizing liberation theology's rejection of it.

Since God's bias toward the poor is framed within the Marxist ideological definition of the oppressed and its view of society, the liberationist notion of God's option for the poor is interpreted as option for one social group over against the other. The radicalism of this partisanship is not only expressed through class struggle, with God siding with "the oppressed against the oppressor," but it also actually amounts to a theological and ethical dualism. "The God of the lords and masters," Gutiérrez says, "is not the same God in whom the poor and exploited believe." How then shall we maintain the

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1 Ronald Sider accepts the thesis that God is on the side of the poor, but he sets a list of qualifications limiting the meaning of the phrase and explaining what he does not mean by the affirmation (see "An Evangelical Theology of Liberation," in Perspectives on Evangelical Theology, pp. 117-133; reprinted in ChrCent 97 [1980]: 314-318; cf. Sider, "Is God Really on the Side of the Poor?" Sojourners 16, October 1977, pp.11-14). Sider's attempt to save the thesis from nonsense and heresy is, however, strongly criticized by Ronald H. Nash, a declared opponent of liberation theology. Social Justice and the Christian Church (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1983), p. 153.


3 Gutiérrez, "South American Liberation Theology, p. 119.
universality of God? Does not Scripture affirm that "rich and poor have a common bond: the Lord is the Maker of them all?" (Prov 22:2). In the Old Testament God's righteousness is not exclusively concerned with the underdog, the poor, and oppressed. In the biblical sense "righteousness," as Adrio König remarks, "is concerned with all men, ruler and subject, employer and employee." To describe God's preferential option for the poor in terms of the Marxist vision of the oppressor and oppressed locked in class conflict could easily be understood as an expression of ideological sectarianism. As a potentially inflammatory idea, it also can give to the poor the notion that their cause is a "divine mission" and easily become a powerful incentive for a crusading spirit with its driving notion that the end justifies the means.

Furthermore, liberationist identification of "God being on the side of the poor" seems automatically to make the "poor on the side of God." One wonders whether in their attempt to serve the poor politically, liberation theologians are not promoting an externalization which leaves the heart of the gospel unsaid to the poor. Must the oppressed be told that because they are materially poor they are in a special way the apple of God's eye, and that--right or wrong--God is unconditionally on their side, without also being told that poverty in the Old as well as in the New Testament has dimensions that transcend a pure social status?

The Exodus and the Liberation of the Poor

Fundamentally connected with the affirmation of God's partisanship with the poor is liberation theology's use of the Exodus narrative as the biblical validation for the theological proposition of Yaweh's bias toward the oppressed. In contrast with the traditional theological spiritualization of the Exodus, theologians of liberation are very perceptive in emphasizing the need for social justice and concern for the poor in their reading of the narrative which underlies the idea of God acting in deep solidarity with the oppressed against the oppressor (cf. Ex 3:20; 6:6). The very nature of Israel's liberation, they insist, should continue to be the focus of a correct biblical understanding of liberation.

By interpreting the historical Exodus in the light of current Latin American reality, the dominant sociological concern leads liberation theologians to a narrow understanding of the biblical narrative and to what appears as merely a half-recognition of the implications of the Exodus story. While unquestionably correct in their emphasis on God's sensitivity to injustice, liberation theologians overlook the fundamental motive for God's special action in the Exodus, i.e., the peculiar character of the relation that united Him to Israel. Once God's intervention in the Exodus is severed from its covenantal context, the way is open for a

\[1\] To avoid the hermeneutical difficulties which would cut the ground away from the application of the Exodus idea to the Latin American situation, liberation theologians attempt to establish in the narrative Yahweh's non-covenantal concern for the poor. In this case His intervention in favor of Israel was "simply obligatory
misleading extrapolation of the event which becomes a paradigm for mere political liberation.

While attempting to ground Yahweh's intervention exclusively in his concern for justice for the poor and oppressed, regarded as the basic datum of the Old Testament, liberation theologians do not suggest any explanation for the fact that, although there were other oppressed peoples in the ancient world, even what appears as other oppressed foreigners in Egypt,\(^1\) there is no evidence that Yahweh "heard their cry" and delivered them all. Moreover, in the conquest of Canaan, we find an inverted situation in which the Cannanites are the "oppressed" and Israel the " oppressors." Yet, Yahweh sides precisely with the Israelites (cf. Jos 2-20). Although it would be

\[\text{intervention on behalf of the oppressed against their oppressors} \ldots\]  
\[\text{It is the outcry of the oppressed} \ldots\]  
\[\text{that makes this God intervene to revolutionize history}" \,(Miranda, Marx and the Bible, p. 32; also Being and the Messiah, p. 30). For Miranda, any exegesis which tries to make God's liberative action "dependent on a promise or pact as if God would not have intervened against injustice if he had not officially promised to do so beforehand, contradicts \ldots\]  
\[\text{the deepest and most radical conviction of the Old Testament authors}" \,(Marx and the Bible, p. 98; Crotatto, Exodus, p. 20). See Armerding, "Exodus: The Old Testament Foundation of Liberation," in Evangelicals & Liberation, p. 55, for a consistent critique of Miranda's approach to the Exodus narrative based on the Documentary theory.

\(^1\)Exod 11:5 declares that during the last plague, Yahweh's punishment would visit even "the first-born of the slave-girl who is behind the millstones." To sit "behind the two millstones," as the Hebrew literally reads, is to do the work of the lowest woman slave in the household. According to Umberto Cassuto, the expression means "the poorest of the poor" (A Commentary on the Book of Exodus [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1967], p. 133). The cry of the "poorest of the poor" was apparently not heard by Yahweh. Rather, they participated in the judgments of the oppressor. This does not mean that Yahweh was not sensitive to their situation, only that the Exodus must be basically understood in reference to the covenant with the fathers.
impossible to deny God's universal concern for the poor, this
universality, however, should not be allowed to obscure God's freedom
to work through particular and specific events. The book of Exodus
makes it clear that the deliverance of Israel from Egypt was God's
exceptional intervention, wrought in pursuance of the promises given
by covenant to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exod 2:14). ¹

Contrary to liberation theology's exemplaristic use of the
Exodus, which tends to transform the event into an isolated occurrence to provide symbolic force to the Latin American church of the
poor and its struggle against oppression, the deliverance of Israel
from Egypt, as portrayed by the biblical narrative, can only be
understood in the context of the historical relationship between
Yahweh and Israel, whose beginning traces back to the book of
Genesis. ² Thus, in opposition to the idea that the object of Yahweh's

¹The phrase "to establish a covenant" in Exod 6:4-5, as U.
Cassuto observes, means to fulfill an already promised covenant (The
Documentary Hypothesis [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew
University, 1961], pp. 47-50). Here Yahweh is talking about fulfilling his already existing covenant with the patriarchs. Jonathan
Magonet's structural analysis of Exod 6:2-8 makes clear that the
covenant is the dominating element in freeing Israel from slavery.
theologians, like other biblical scholars, claim that the covenantal
dimension of the Exodus narrative is simply a retrojection of
Israel's later belief. John Bright, however, has spoken for the
majority of Old Testament scholars when he strongly objects to this
understanding as doing violence to the clear textual evidences. See A

²In its opening verses, the book of Exodus (1:7) portrays a
deliberate connection with the closing chapters of Genesis, and
"functions as a transitional verse" (Brevard S. Childs The Book of
Exodus [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974], pp. 2-3); for an
extended analysis, see Dupertuis, pp. 205-242.
intervention at the was Exodus only an anonymous semi-nomadic group of slaves without a consciousness of peoplehood before the liberative event, several facts seem to indicate that a people-group existed before oppression began.\(^1\) (1) The relationship of the people with the patriarchs is both ancient and strong (Exod 3:1-2);\(^2\) (2) Moses' leadership hardly would have been accepted, except on the grounds that he represented the God whom the people knew from the past;\(^3\) and (3) the oppression was precisely the result of their being a people prior to Moses. Thus, as Yoder pointedly remarks, "Peoplehood is the presupposition, not the product of the Exodus."\(^4\) Israel found favor with Yahweh not merely because it cried out in its affliction, but primarily, because it was "His" people. "His first-born"


\(^2\) See Childs, The Book of Exodus, pp. 55, 56.

\(^3\) It should be noted that whereas Israel, in the first part of Exod 3:7-10 is referred to as "my people" (vs. 7), it is called "the children of Israel" in the second part of the pericope (vs. 9). In the closing sentence (vs. 10), which draws the conclusion that Moses is to be sent to rescue the Israelites, these two descriptions are brought together in a dramatic climax: "Bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt." Furthermore, Exod 6:6 uses the verb ga'\(\al\) to describe the redemption of Israel from Egypt. Ga'\(\al\), it must be kept in mind, is a technical term for the redeeming of family land that has been sold (cf. Lev 25:25) and for securing the release of someone who has had to sell himself as a slave for financial reasons (Lev 25:48ff). The redeemer has that particular responsibility because of his position within the family (Ruth 4). Thus Yahweh, as the redeemer of Israel, is acting, so to speak, as a member of the family, presumably because of the bond and, indeed the relationship he has to them through the covenant (cf. Exod 4:22). See Magonet, p. 65; Helmer Ringgreen, "Ga'\(\al\)" TDOT 2:350-355.

\(^4\) Yoder, "Exodus and Exile," p. 303.
(Exod 4:22-23).¹ The pervasive idea of the whole narrative is that "the Israelites are thought less as slaves to be rescued by a relation than as property withheld from its original owner and to be regained by him."² God's liberative intervention at the Exodus was more an act of redemption than a purely a political act to secure the freedom of the poor and oppressed.

Closely connected with this vision of the Exodus is the role assigned to the oppressed in the process of liberation. Moses is often portrayed as a revolutionary leader who conducted the slaves in successful revolt against their oppressors.³ One wonders, however, to what extent the Marxist notion of the proletariat informs liberationist rereading of the Exodus event. Here, one of the striking features of the biblical text is the recurring theocentric emphasis of the story. The whole focus of the narrative assigns the act of redemption solely to Yahweh, who through an unsurpassed display of power

¹This is the only time in the Old Testament in which Israel is referred to as the "first-born." See Phillip Yatt, Commentary on Exodus, New Century Bible (London: Marshal, Morgan and Scott, 1971), p. 86. While in the Ancient Near East monarchs used to claim that they were sons of god, in Exod 4:22-23, it is God who uses the expression as an integral part of his call to deliver Israel from Egypt. Furthermore, the text has an unavoidable meaning: Israel is not called to be Yahweh's son, it already enjoyed this status in Egypt. D. McCarthy, "Israel My First-Born Son," The Way 5 (1966):183-191.


³Liberation theologians argue that the Jews, once liberated through a long process of reinterpretations reversed the importance of the human role, to the extent that Yahweh, rather than Moses and the people, occupies the center stage. Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 156; Miranda, Marx and the Bible, pp. 97-98; Croatto, Liberación y libertad, pp. 42, 43, 52-54. As Bright notes, however, the biblical
liberated Israel in His own way and time. In fact, human collaboration could hardly be further minimized. The biblical narrative introduces Moses as a leader only when his revolutionary plans have failed, and then, far from being pictured as a freedom fighter or a fearless deliverer, he is more an aging shepherd who wants to be left in peace, not only absolutely determined not to be a hero, but also skeptical about the whole affair of liberation. Israel, on the other hand, from its initiation to its culmination, is pictured as an act of Yahweh, and Yahweh alone (see Childs, p. 119). The biblical narrative consistently uses the terminology of the miraculous: "miracle" (Exod 3:20), "sign" (4:8, 17); "wonder" (4:21); "judgment" (6:6). Furthermore the divine power at work is expressed in theocentric emphasis: "by a strong hand" (3:19); "my hand" (3:20; cf. 9:3; 13:3; 6:6; 8:19).

Out of his concern for justice for the oppressed, Moses took the route of violent intervention (Exod 2:12). But his self-appointed mission and guerrilla tactics were fruitless (Keil, Commentary on the Old Testament, 1:431). Moses' failure serves only to bring to prominence the indispensability of God's intervention if the slaves were to be freed.

See J. Moltmann, The Power of the Powerless (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 14. In fact, Moses' first reaction to the divine call is marked by an anti-hero attitude. He attempts to get rid of the divine mission with a series of objections (Exod 3:11; 4:4; 4:10; Moltmann, The Power of the Powerless, p. 15). The very rural setting of Moses' encounter with Yahweh seems to suggest the implication of his objections: "What business has a shepherd with such a mission?" Yahweh sweeps aside all excuses and through a majestic act of self-identification: 'Ehyeh asher 'ehyeh (Exod 3:14), and through signs of miraculous power (Exod 4:2-17), gives Moses the assurance that the grounds for his being sent do not rest in human ability, but in Yahweh himself (see David Noel Freedman, "The Name of the God of Moses," JBL 79: [1960]:151-156; Childs, The Book of Exodus, pp 60-77; Bright, A History of Israel, pp. 151-152).
hand far from being described as a partner in the plan of Yahweh, is judged for consistent resistance and allegiance to the idols of Egypt. The Exodus, far from being conceived as a coup d'etat, a takeover or the overthrowing of the oppressors, is a withdrawal. Led by Yahweh, Israel fled from Egypt; it did not overcome its oppressors and establish a new social order there.

Placing overemphasis on the Exodus as a "political act" of deliverance, which does away with the idea of prior relationship between the oppressed and Yahweh, liberation theologians attempt to understand the event as a paradigmatic legitimation for the praxis of the basic communities regarded as part of the ongoing historical presence of God in the midst of his people. In this case, to retain the notion of the Latin American poor as the contemporary counterpart of Israel and thus to inspire a revolutionary enthusiasm based on the word of the Lord of history, liberation theologians focus their near exclusive emphasis on the liberation from rather than liberation to.

The liberation from Egypt, we must emphasize, is only half of the story. Israel was rescued from slavery not only to "establish a

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1 The book of Exodus gives a picture of Israel's consistent unbelief and rebellion (cf. Exod 5:21; 6:9-12; 14:10-12; 15:14; 16:3; 17:2-7; 32:1-35; 33:3-5). In her state of obstinacy, Israel, while in Egypt needed a more radical conscientization than that suggested by liberation theologians (cf. Croatto, Liberacion, p. 36; Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 156, 91-92, 113-117). Ezek 20:8 provides a vivid summary of Israel's situation. Commanded by the Lord to abandon its unfaithfulness, Israel remained unchanged. Verses 9-27 leave no doubt that the Exodus took place not only absolutely independent of Israel's cooperation, but also in spite of its unbelief.

2 See McCann, Christian Realism, p. 188.
society free from misery and alienation,"¹ as Gutiérrez suggests; but to be made free from the servitude to Pharaoh to serve Yahweh (Exod 4:23; 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3); thus the climax of the Exodus experience was not the withdrawal from Egypt but the arrival at Sinai, with the renewal of the covenant that gives full meaning to the liberation from Egypt.² As Yoder observes, "Exodus was the leap of faith but Sinai was its landing. Historically Exodus was the prerequisite of Sinai; but morally it is the other way 'round. Liberation is from bondage and for covenant, and what for matters more than what from."³ Yahweh's ultimate goal in liberating Israel was not to facilitate the erecting of another kingdom on earth, but to make it a holy nation (Exod 19:5-6). Israel was delivered from bondage and oppression to the freedom and dignity of sonship, to live in lasting relationship with Yahweh and fulfill a special mission.⁴

¹Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 157.

²Exod 19-24, containing the theme of the covenant and law, is the heart of the narrative. As Roy Honeycutt remarks, "All of Exodus 1-18 is preparatory to the events described in 19-24, and the Sinai narrative (19:1-24; 32:1-35) is the climactic point of the entire book. All before Sinai is prelude; all that follows is postlude." "Exodus" The Broadman Bible Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1973), 1:405.

³Yoder, "Exodus and Exile," p. 305.

⁴Significantly, liberation theologians pay little attention to the Exodus as reinterpreted from the perspective of later Old Testament writings and the New Testament. Particularly Isa 40-55 lessen concentration on the political bondage and place relatively more stress on bondage to rebellion against God on the part of both oppressed and oppressor alike (see Goldingay, "The Hermeneutics of Liberation Theology," p. 145). The New Testament, arising out of a context when Jews are once again unjustly oppressed, nevertheless makes little reaffirmation of God's commitment to political
The Poor in the Bible

In its attempt to avoid traditional spiritualization of the theme of poverty, which ultimately has served as an effective means to sacralize the situation of misery in which millions of Latin Americans live, liberation theologians have turned to the use of class analysis. In their Marxist-influenced view of society they tend to see the poor in terms of the proletariat. The one-dimensional focus on the poor as sinners or humble, thus, is replaced by another one-dimensional focus on the poor as the socioeconomically oppressed and alienated who conform with ideological demands.

Clearly, since the Bible is only the "second word" preceded liberation. Instead, it uses the Exodus story as a means of picturing liberation from sin, not in its original political significance (Goldingay, ibid.). Although the major portion of the vocabulary used to express the saving work of God in Christ is drawn from the Exodus event (J. Coert Ryllarsdam, "Introduction and Exegesis of Exodus," The Interpreter's Bible, 12 vols., ed., G. A. Buttrick [New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1956], 1:296), for the New Testament writers the redemption through Jesus Christ is a greater exodus from a deeper oppression and bondage (see Freed L. Fisher, "The New and Greater Exodus: The Exodus Pattern in the New Testament," SWJT 19-20 [1976-78]:69-79). Thus, Paul's speech in Acts 13 begins with reference to the Exodus from Egypt, yet concludes that Israel did not really achieve freedom. His main argument is that only in Christ is there freedom from everything that Israel could not be freed from by Moses (Childs, p. 233). This is not a question of mere "spiritualization" of the Exodus. Placing life within the perspective of the Kingdom, Jesus has given new dimensions to liberation and removed the bondage which prevents men from working creatively towards brotherhood. See Kirk, Liberation Theology, pp. 153-159; Dupertuis, pp. 273-280.

An illustration of this kind of spiritualization is found in Richard D. Petterson's article "The Widow, the Orphan and the Poor in the Old Testament and the Extra-Biblical Literature," BibSac 130 (1973):223-234—the only ethical responsibility derived from his study is evangelism. Christians have "to remember that there is still a lost mankind which stands, spiritually speaking, widowed, orphaned, and destitute of the family of God" (p. 233).
by the "first word" of the social sciences, liberation theologians tend to limit the meaning of the biblical text to a purely socioeconomic level, as in the case of the Exodus. Expanding our analysis of the concept of the poor held by the main exponents of liberation theology in relation to the biblical notion, we now focus attention on the Old Testament "poor" terminology.

The poor in the Old Testament

Liberation theologians correctly protest against the traditional exegesis which has minimized the elements of real poverty, spiritualizing what Scriptures regards as an evil social situation, utterly contrary to God's will. The Hebrew Old Testament uses five main terms for those lacking material possessions:¹ at least 245

times, they are described as rash, dal, ebhyôn, 'ani, 'anaw.


2 Dal is used 48 times in the Hebrew text. Most of the occurrences appear in the Prophets (13 times) and wisdom writings (20 times). Dal refers to one who is powerless, impotent, weakened, helpless. He is the one "without social strength" (Harris, Archer and Waltke, pp. 1:190-191). The word describes those in the lowest social classes, the poor, needy, unimportant (cf. 2 Kgs 24:14; 25:12; Colin Brown, 2:822). Prov 28:3 even presents the case of a "poor man (rash) who oppresses the poor (dallin). Only infrequently is dall used in a spiritual sense (cf. Jer. 5:4).

3 Ebhyôn describes the poor from the point of view of want and need (cf. Exod 23:6; Deut 15:14; 1 Sam 2:8, etc). The word is used 61 times in the Hebrew Old Testament, especially in the Psalms (24 times) and in the Prophets (17 times). In his study of the 'ebhyôn, P. Humbert observes that the word implies an essential idea of pleading and expresses an expectation and a demand ("Le mot biblique 'ebhyôn" pp. 1-6). Yet, Humbert notes that in the Psalms the term has been transposed to a spiritual level where it may apply to a man who begs for divine assistance (see below).

4 'ani, means the bent-over one, the one laboring under a weight, the one not in possession of his whole strength and vigor. It is the main Hebrew word to describe the poor and appears 80 times in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms (32 times) and in the Prophets (25 times). Commentators in general relate the 'ani with the oppressed, those wrongfully impoverished (Colin Brown, 2:821, Bammel, "Ptochos," TDNT 6:647; see The Thailand Report on the Urban Poor [Wheaton: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1980], pp. 22-23; cf. Amos 2:7; 8:5-6; Hab 2:6; Micah 2:1-2; 6:12; Jer 22:12-17; Isa 5:23). "The antonyms for 'ani," Mealand remarks, "are often words meaning 'violent,' which indicates that 'ani means 'oppressed.'" Poverty and Expectation in the Gospels, pp. 101-102; Bammel, ibid). We will return to the religious significance of 'ani.

5 'Anaw, especially common in the Psalms (13 times) and Prophets (7 times), has a definite religious meaning indicating humility and meekness before God, while, in some cases, still keeping reference to material poverty.
words that at one time or another are translated "poor" in the King James and other English versions.¹

Taken together, the Old Testament words for poor paint a picture of a destitute, needy, helpless, and oppressed people. In fact, Scripture unquestionably regards poverty, to use Gutiérrez' word, as a "scandal," something abnormal, indeed, a breach of the covenant, generally the result of oppression. Particularly in the law codes and the prophets,² the poor ones in Israel were viewed as defenseless and in need of the protection of Yahweh. It should be noted, however, that the very variety of the terms used to describe the poor suggests the complexity of the concept. It should put one on guard against any simplistic systematization and imposition of modern understanding on the biblical language.

Contrary to Gutiérrez' tendency to see the poor in the Bible exclusively as the economically oppressed³ and equate them with the

¹Closest to the English term "poor" with its connotations of lack is rash. The Septuagint translates the different Hebrew terms in a variety of ways: ptochos (88 times; etymologically, "one who crouches," in classical usage, a "beggar"); penes (67 times; etymologically, "one who works hard," in classical usage, "one who has only necessities and lives from his work by saving"); tapeinos (21 times; the one who is low); praus (12 times; "meek"). See George, "Pauvre," pp. 388-389; Dupont, Les béatitudes, 2:20-34.

²The prophets in particular inveigh against every form of oppression by which people are made and kept poor: dishonest business (Amos 8:5-6); exorbitant interest (Hab 2:6); seizure of land (Mic 2:1-2), non-payment of wages (Jer 22:13-17); manipulation of justice (Isa 5:23), and deceit and violence on the part of the rich (Mic 6:12; Jones "Who Are the Poor," p. 218; Hoyt, The Poor, pp.31-43).

³Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 291; The Power of the Poor, p. 96. Unquestionably, there are many examples of oppression, oppressors, and oppressed people in the Bible (see Jacques Pons, L'oppression dans...
modern concept of "class," in the Psalms, for example, where the 
great concentration of the words 'ani and 'anaw occurs, the poverty 
terminology refers to a whole range of need and suffering in addition 
to literal economic poverty.  
Persecution leads the psalmist to cry 
to God that he is poor and needy ('ani, cf. Ps 22:24; 35:10; 69:29; 
70:5; 74:19, 21; 76:9; 109:16, 22; 140:12). Such language could 
hardly be understood as automatically expressing the modern concept 
of poverty in terms of economic oppression. In Ps 9 it is Israel 
over against the nations that oppress it, that is described as 
"poor." In Ps 88:16, a sick man calls himself poor-- 'ani.

Tamez, Bible of the Oppressed [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982]; 
T.D. Hanks, God so Loved the Third World, [Maryknoll, N.Y. Orbis 
Books, 1983], pp. 3-40). F. J. Brown, however, remarks that the 
concept of oppression defended by liberation theologians "is not a 
biblical category, but rather one that is drawn from nonbiblical 

Besides, in the wisdom literature we find a different 
attitude towards wealth and poverty. In Proverbs the predominant view 
is that wealth is a good thing (Prov. 10:15; 14:20; 18:11, 16, 23; 
19:4, 6; 22:7). On the other hand, if one is poor, there is very 
likely something wrong in his life. The causes of poverty are 
diverse, but it is generally considered as a self-inflicted evil, the 
result of impatience (Prov 21:5 28:22); rejection of instruction 
(Prov 13:18); excessive pleasure (Prov 12:11; 21:17; 23:20-21; 
Robert Gordis, "The Social Background of Wisdom Literature," HUCA 28 
(1943-44):77-118; T. Donald, "The Semantic Field of Rich and Poor in 
the Wisdom Literature," pp. 27-41; Hoyt, pp. 43-46.

2See also Ps 37; 49; 68:10; 74:19-21; 76:9; 149:4-9. For some 
scholars the 'anawim in the Psalms are Israel or her representative 
men in times of emergency, "oppressed" by external enemies, 
"helpless" in their own power and "humbly" hoping for the 
interference of Yahweh. S. Mowinckel, The Psalms in Israel Worship 2 
58.
The context of Ps 113:7-9 (cf. 1 Sam 2:8) suggests that even a barren woman is counted among the poor. In Ps 25:16 both enemies and sins contribute to the condition of the poor. The dominant idea in the Psalms is that the poor are the needy, those oppressed by affliction, sin, illness, loneliness, nearness to death (cf. Ps 9:13; 15; 35:16, 21; 40:13, 16; 69:4, 18, 21; 86:7; 109:22, etc.), not necessarily the economically deprived and oppressed. The poor in these texts are qualified to receive God's help or have God on their side, not because of any class-bias, but, as Seccombe writes, because "only those in need have anything to be saved from."^1

The point here is not to deny the unavoidable socioeconomic dimension of poverty in the Bible, but to indicate that there are more kinds of poverty, oppression, and helplessness within the scope of God's concern than liberation theologians seem to recognize. Liberation theology's insistence that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed fails, not because it is devoid of truth, but because it does not provide a comprehensive account of the nature of oppression. This is why the Marxist-oriented oppressed/oppressor polarization is so inadequate.\(^2\) To reduce oppression to the Marxist model is a naive oversimplification of the complexity of life and reality. Liberation theology is unquestionably correct, insisting that a central concern of the Christian community should be to identify

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^2 See above, pp. 280-285.
with the poor and oppressed; but, as Richard Mouw asks, "who are to be properly included in the class of the poor and oppressed?" Should this concern be restricted exclusively to the economically deprived, or the proletariat? If this is the case, then doing theology "from the perspective of the poor" runs the risk of being transformed into merely another expression of ideological sectarianism. It fails, not because it is radical, but because it is not radical enough.

The poor in spirit

Significantly, Gutiérrez, in his discussion of the "biblical meaning of poverty," devotes five pages to material poverty and only one and a half to spiritual poverty, termed by him "spiritual childhood." Although this imbalance is understandable, one wonders if he, like liberation theologians in general, does justice to the

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1 R. Mouw, "New Alignments and the Future of Evangelicism," in Against the World, for the World, ed. P. L. Berger and R. J. Neuhaus (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), pp. 123-124. Mouw goes on to ask "Are they [the poor] to include Nixon, who is presently an outcast and despised person? What about a financially well-off used car salesman who is experiencing a painful divorce? Or bored, pot-smoking students in an all-white suburban high school?" The list is far from complete. What about the marginalized aging people, the disabled, or those facing terminal illness? What about the other forms of oppression in Latin America? Is not the biblical category of "the poor" and oppressed" broad and fluid enough to include them too, whatever their social status?

2 Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 201-296.

3 The discussion under the title "Poverty: Spiritual Childhood," in Gutiérrez, A Theology, goes from page 296-299, but from the middle of page 297, he starts dealing with Luke's version of the beatitude "blessed are the poor" (6:20).
complex issue of the biblical use of the "poor" vocabulary.

In the heated theological climate, simply to raise the question of the biblical use of the "poor" terminology in a non-literal sense is not only to approach an extremely delicate subject, but also to offer an invitation to charges of class-bias, since, as Jones remarks, the idea is generally associated with an exegesis that is often blind to the biblical teaching about the objective character of poverty and God's concern for the literally poor. Yet it is not an a priori impossibility that, as a common feature of language, the same term might be used to designate both a sociological as well as an interior, subjective disposition. This seems to be the case particularly with 'ani and 'anaw. The following pages, though far

1Jones, p. 219. Although it is true that any theology based on syntactic word study detached from the streams of concrete reality is a regrettable mistake, if theology is meant to be biblical theology at all, close attention must be paid to the meaning of the words, otherwise we run the risk of using the Bible only to justify concepts strange to its understanding. Precisely for this reason, Avery Dulles in a letter to Sergio Torres prior to the Conference "Theology in the Americas," to be held in Detroit in August 1975, urged that attention should be given to the identity of the "poor, the anawim of the gospels" (cf. Theology in the Americas, p. 95).

2For the sake of space we do not include the word 'ebhyôn here. This, however, should not obscure the rich religious dimension of this term. See Botterweck's discussion of the "religious classification of the 'ebhyôn," "Ebhyôn," pp. 37-38. P. Humbert notes that in the Psalms, where the 'ebhyôn is particularly common, the word has been transposed to a spiritual and metaphorical level where it may apply to a man who begs for divine assistance, "Le mot biblique, 'ebhyôn," p. 5. Furthermore, Francis X. Kelly warns that because 'ebhyôn is often used metaphorically, we must be careful lest we automatically translate the term as "poor." Poor and Rich in Epistle of James (Ph.D. Dissertation Temple University, 1972), pp. 2-3. See Psalms 35:23; 70:5; 40:16-17; 86:1-6; 109:22; 140:6; 17:7; 69:13, 16, 17, 33. On the basis of parallelismus membrorum, the 'ebhyôn is connected not only with the 'ani or 'anawim, but also with
from exhaustive, attempt to indicate the religious dimension expressed by these words which form an indispensable background for a comprehensive understanding of the biblical meaning of poverty.

'Anî/'Anawîm, the poor of Yahweh

The discussion of the poor as the pious usually centers around the problem of 'anî/'anawîm, which are the more commonly used Hebrew words for "poor" in the Old Testament. The difficulties of interpretation surrounding these terms are highly complex, and here we are, in fact, in the presence of a problem so complicated "qu'il apparaît insoluble." Traditionally, the issue was framed within the semantic field. Alfred Rahlfs, later closely followed by S. R. Driver, championed the view that although 'anî and 'anaw belong to the same root, they are basically different in meaning. For these scholars, while 'anî is morally neutral, referring to a social condition of humility or poverty; 'anaw, generally used in the plural

those who are clearly designated as 'ebhdeh (servant, Ps 12:6); chasîdh (godly, Ps 86:2); 'emunîm (faithful, Ps 12:1-2); 'ssaddîqîm (righteous Ps 140:14); 'yesha'rîm (upright, Ps 140:14). See Botterweck, pp. 37-38.


2 Van Den Berghe, p. 290.

form (‘anawim), fundamentally expresses the correspondent inner religious attitude.1

This theory, however, has been challenged. On the other side of the discussion A. Briggs, S. Mowinckel, and H. Birkeland2 advocate a view almost antithetical. For them there is no distinction between 'ani and 'anaw since these words are frequently confused.3 A further development, however, has placed the debate in a different polemical context. Leaving aside the study of semantic distinction between the two words, scholars have tended to concentrate on explaining how 'ani and 'anaw had come to express a moral and religious ideal after having been used to denote the social conditions proper to literal poverty and distress.4

But the origin and the extent of the equation of the poor and pious have also been a source of contention.5 While some have

1Rahlf, "Ani und 'Anaw i.1 den Psalmen, pp. 54, 73.
2A. Briggs, Psalms (Edinburgh: Clark, 1906), p. 84; Sigmund Mowinckel, Psalmenstudien I (Oslo: Jacob Dybwad, 1921), p. 113; Harris Birkeland, Psalmenstudien VI: Die Psalmendichter (Oslo: Jacob Dybwad, 1924), pp. 58-65; also H. Birkeland’s 'Ani and 'Anaw, pp. 47-63; idem, Evildoers in the Book of Psalms, pp. 58, 72-73.
3Mowinckel argues that the basic meaning of 'ani, “bent down,” may be used either passively to signify “poor,” “oppressed,” “miserable,” or reflexively and thereby indicating the religious nuances of being bent before God as a servant who acts according to the divine will (Psalmenstudien , p. 113; Rudolf Kittel, Die Psalmen [Leipzig: Deichert, 1922], p. 285).
5Furthermore, during the debate on the semantic evolution of the terms of poverty, a number of authors, leaning on Rahlf's conclusions, defended the existence of a "party of the poor," not
argued for a pre-exilic date, others for an exilic date, there are authors who have advocated a post-exilic origin.¹ Placing his understanding of the religious meaning of poverty within this evolutive line of thought, Gutiérrez sees a clear division in the Old Testament "poor" terminology. Following Gelin, he argues that from the seventh century B.C. on, the vocabulary which was used to describe a socioeconomic situation, progressively received a religious content.² Significantly, however, Gutiérrez completely


²Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 296; cf. Gelin, p. c6. Some scholars have rejected the notion that the Old Testament presents an evolution or specialization of the concept of the poor. They regard the religious quality of 'ani and 'anaw as inherent to the etymology of these words. Nowinckel argues that the religious interpretation of 'ani is "uralt" (i.e., very old) and inherent to the etymology of the word (Psalmenstudien, pp. 113, 116). Liano insists that the word 'anaw in the Old Testament "tiene fundamentalmente un sentido spiritual no precisamente de 'pobre virtud' sino la humildad, mansedumbre y piedad" ("Los pobres," p. 16). In a footnote he refers to Num 12:3 (where Moses is described as 'anaw) as evidence of the fundamentally spiritual meaning of the word. Some scholars, however,
ignores this development when he deals with the poor in the gospel of Luke.

Whatever the position adopted regarding to the linguistic relationship between 'ani and 'anaw or the precise origin of the equation of pious and poor, some major points are noteworthy. First, even though we may conclude with some scholars that 'ani is usually a non-religious term, primarily descriptive of economic and socio-logical conditions, the fact that Israel's history is part of a religio-cultural wholeness should speak against any hasty dichotomy between the sociological and religious meanings.\(^1\) Second, if on one hand 'ani describes the socially deprived, and on the other, as the word which best expresses the complex character of biblical poverty, as we have indicated, it has a much broader scope than simply to denote a socioeconomic status. Third, undeniably 'ani has both socioeconomic and religious connotation. In some cases the word appears in moral contexts, which reflect a theological meaning (Ps 14:6; 18:28; 22:26; 25:16; 34:6; 40:17; 69:29; 86:1). In these texts, both elements coalesce as integral to 'ani.\(^2\) In this connection it should be noted that 'ani in some instances occurs in parallel construction with the "righteous" (Ps 14:6),\(^3\) or "godly" (Ps 86:1-2). Their oppressors,
interestingly enough, are never termed 'ashir, the rich, but rasha',

the wicked, which is a theological category. Furthermore, in Zech
9:9, the Messiah is described as 'ani and in Zeph 3:12, "the poor,"
'ani is descriptive of the future messianic people, the remnant.

Regarding the word 'anaw/'anawim, the term is predominantly
used in a religious and moral sense in the Psalms (Ps 22:26; 25:9;
34:2; 37:11; 69:32; 76:9; 147:6; 149:4). While in some of these
passages one may detect the 'anawim overlapping in meaning with the
dual socioeconomic and religious focus of 'ani, "the accent is
clearly on the religious element, on the dependent relationship

'ani is not intrinsically "righteous," but only in relationship to
the oppressor (Mowinckel, p. 116).

'Rasha', the wicked, appears over 266 times in the Old
Testament, mostly in Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ezekiel, as a
technical term referring to those who sinned willfully and heinously
and who did not repent. See E. P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian
119. Although the characterization of the wicked as proud, greedy,
presumptuous, and oppressive indicates that they were the wealthy and
powerful aristocracy (Mowinckel, Psalmenstudien, p. 115-116; Hoyt,
The Poor, pp. 48-49), the word is used in parallel with almost every
Hebrew term for sin, evil, and iniquity. This fact clearly stresses
the basic theological meaning of the concept, independent of economic
social status (cf. Exod 2:13; Num 35:31; 2 Sam 4:11; Ezek 33:11; Ps
37:28). The measure of rasha' is its contrast with the character and
attitude of God (2 Chr 19:2; Mal 3:18). Frequently (80 times) in the
book of Proverbs, rasha' is placed in antithetic parallelism to tsedeq
(the righteous).

For Gelin this text provides strong evidence for rejecting the
claim of those exegetes who "attach only a sociological value to the
vocabulary of poverty, because the messianic people were not to be
indigent" (Gelin, The Poor, p. 31).

In some exceptional cases the word appears in no strictly
moral contexts; these exceptions are found in Amos 2:7; 8:4; Isa
11:4; 61:1.
bewteen the poor and God.”¹ Outside the Psalter ḏanaw/ḏanawim occurs in three moral contexts: Num 12:3; Zeph 2:3; and Isa 29:19. In each case, the ḏanaw/ḏanawim, the “poor ones,” are at least by implication the pious and humble. In the Zephaniah passage, the ḏanawim are equated with the righteous remnant, and poverty, ḏanawah, is to be sought after.

We should conclude the above considerations emphasizing that even when the poor terminology is enriched by religious dimensions, this does not mean that "poor" has a religious meaning akin to pious. The religious dimension of this language lies primarily in God’s known character as the One who protects and rescues those who are in need. As Seccombe writes, there is nothing positive about poverty and suffering except that it leads a man to call on God who saves him from evil.²

The poor in the book of Isaiah

Turning our attention to the poor in the context of the book of Isaiah--the immediate source for Luke’s reference to the poor--careful attention reveals two significant modifications: on the one hand, "the poor" becomes more or less synonymous with the exiled and needy Israel; on the other, the promise of God’s vindication of "the poor" in the future emerges in full view as an eschatological hope. Without intention of detailed elaboration on these two points, the


²Seccombe, Possessions and Poor, p. 27
following discussion mainly broaches the important aspects for our study.

It is noteworthy that there is no unified view of the poor in Isaiah. In the early chapters of the book, references to the poor appear in the context of the prophet's condemnation of social oppression and ethical demand for justice. The poor are clearly the peasants of the pre-exilic period, being oppressed by the wealthy and powerful. The prophet warns the rich that God cares for the poor and will defend them. But the prophet has no illusions about the piety of the poor; in his eyes, "everyone is ungodly and an evil-doer," even the "fatherless and widows" (Isa 9:17; cf. Jer. 5:1-5). Under the messianic ruler (chap. 11), however, there will be justice for the poor and Zion will be a secure habitation for the oppressed (Isa 14:29-32). The idea is not that the poor are righteous and thus deserving of salvation, but that the conditions of the new age, unlike the present, will be such that they can live in safety.

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2Prominent in the call to repentance is the demand for justice epitomized in the defense of the weak against the ruthless (Isa 1:16-23). In contrast to the oppressive rulers of Isaiah's day who deprives the needy (dallim), and rob the poor (aniyye)" (Isa 10:2; cf. 3:14), the prophet declares that God himself will act. In Isa 11:1-5 emerges the promised shoot from the stump of Jesse (Isa 11:1). As in the prophecy of Isa 61, the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him (Isa 11:2), "and he with righteousness will judge the needy (dallim), and with justice he will give decisions for the poor (\"anawim\) of the earth" (Isa 11:4).

3See Seccombe, Possessions and the Poor, p. 37.
In the latter part of Isaiah, however, a change is noticeable and the concept of the poor gains a new dimension. Particularly from chap. 40 on, the situation of oppression is no longer seen in terms of the individual poor Israelite being exploited by his rich overlords. The tragedy of the exile led to a collective use of 'ani. The whole nation languishing in exile is now "the poor," oppressed not only by Gentile nations, but—and this point is crucial—by the Lord himself (Isa 42:24, 25; cf. 30:20, 21). Israel is not only "the poor" and "oppressed" but also the "blind" (Isa 59:9-10). In the depressed situation the exilic-community cries out: "We look for light, and behold darkness, and for brightness but we walk in gloom. We grope for the wall like the blind, we grope like those who had no eyes" (Isa 59:9-10). More than simply a description of lack of spiritual knowledge, this is a graphic picture of hopeless mourning.

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1 This equation is clearly evident in Isa 49:13 "the poor" ('aniyyan) is explicitly identified with the nation in captivity. See Baudissin, pp. 211-215. The same is true in Isa 41:8-20: the "poor and needy" ('aniyyim/ebhyûn, LXX ptochos) are "you worm Jacob, you men of Israel," who have suffered through the experience of the exile. In Isa 54:11, Zion is called 'ani, cf. Isa 51:21. See Seccombe, pp. 37-38; Bammel, "Ptochos," p. 893. It should be mentioned that this equation, as Baudissin correctly argues, began earlier in Isaiah (pp. 211-215; cf. Isa 29:19; Ps 9; 12:6; 68:10; 149:4). In later Judaism, the Qumran sect seized upon the pre-existing soteriological theme (present also in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha; cf. Psalms of Solomon, 2:22; 7:8-10; 8:26-28, 34; 9:11; 11:1ff; 12:6; 14:5; 17:21ff, 45; see G. Buchanan Gray, "The Psalms of Solomon," in R. H. Charles, ed. The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English [Oxford: Clarendon, 1913], 2:628ff; also Bammel, pp. 894-895), which depicted Israel's salvation as coterminous with the salvation of the poor, and applied this to themselves, "the remnant" (CD 3:4-19; IIQPsa 154:18), the "poor of the promise" (4QpP37 1:8-10; see below). The Qumran references were taken from A. Dupont-Sommer, The Essene Writings from Qumran (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1973); for the symbols, see p. 421.
where judgment and salvation are far away. However, in Isa 29:18-19, the prophet has already introduced a theme central to his gospel of liberation. Along with the "afflicted" (anawim), and the "needy" (ebhyôn), who "shall rejoice in the Lord," he refers to the blind who will see. Isaiah's vision of the glorious eschatological future for the poor is particularly developed in chaps. 40-66 under the "comfort motif," understood in terms of the Lord's compassion on his "afflicted," aniyyan (Isa 49:13). In Isa 42:7-16 and 49:9 there is a convergence between the liberation of the captives and giving sight to the blind. Not surprisingly, God's saving intervention in favor of his oppressed people is described as the dawning of light.

In the light of the background just broached, it seems evident that the poverty of the anawim in the crucial and climatic text of Isa 61:1-2--the text which lies behind every major reference

1The thirsty and penniless ones to whom the great invitation of Isa 55:1 is made are significantly called aniyyim and ebhyôn, ("the poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst").

2On the relationship between the imagery of "giving sight to the blind" and "releasing captives" (see Seccombe, p. 59). Since the Exile was characterized as darkness (Isa 42:7, cf. Targum on Isa 42:7), it is understandable that freedom should be symbolized by the return of sight. Furthermore, light and darkness were also images for the presence or absence of God (Isa 60:19ff); absence from the land, thus, was conceived as dwelling in darkness (cf. Isa. 59:9-10).

3Cf. Isa 60:1-3, 19-22; 62:1; 58:10. For later equation of light and salvation, see TgIsa 9:1; MidrPs 27:1; PesR36; TgIsa 60:1; I Enoch 1:8; 5:6; 34:4; 55:4. In the Qumran literature, this notion of light/darkness is further developed to express the ultimate division between God and Be'lial, truth and ignorance, blessedness and suffering (Seccombe, pp. 59-60).
dealing with the poor in the Gospel of Luke\(^1\)--is not primarily a question of economic deprivation at all. As in some of the Psalms, the 'anawim here--as explained by the parallel expressions: "broken-hearted," "captives," "those who are bound," "those who grieve"--are "the poor," in quite a broad sense. Although literal poverty is not absent, the emphasis is in the great need into which the nation has fallen through its sin and judgment. The 'anawim in this context embraces the oppressed and poor who know that they are thrown completely on God's help.

Finally, we should mention that both 'anî and 'anawim, with their dual socioeconomic and religious connotations, are taken up and continued into Qumran.\(^2\) Although in the Qumran literature "the poor" is hardly a technical title for the community,\(^3\) as Botterweck notes, in the War Scroll the 'anawim seem "similar to the poor and needy in the Psalms and Deutero-Isaiah."\(^4\) In some cases "the poor" is

\(^1\)See below.

\(^2\)See 1Qh 1:36; 2:34; 5:13, 14; 1Q45 1:1; 3:2; CD 6:16, 21; 14:14; 19:9; 1QM 14:7; 1QH 5:21; 14:3; 18:14; 1QSb 5:22; 4QpIsa. The community, however, tends to put the literal sense in the background. L. Keck remarks that an elemental fact has been largely overlooked, viz., that the Qumran passages which speak of the economic arrangements of the community contain no references whatsoever to "the poor" whereas those passages which speak of "the poor" do not discuss the shared life at all. "The Poor Among the Saints in Jewish Christianity and Qumran," ZNW 57 (1966):68; cf. Botterweck, p. 41.


\(^4\)Botterweck, p. 41.
a title of honor.\textsuperscript{1} Repeatedly throughout the writings of the sect the poor are the objects of God dealings.\textsuperscript{2} Significantly, as in many of the Old Testament Psalms, it is the experience of persecution, not primarily anything economic, as argued by Schubert,\textsuperscript{3} or ascetic, as defended by Gaster,\textsuperscript{4} that led the Teacher of Righteousness and the community to regard themselves as "poor."\textsuperscript{5} It is their acceptance of the "time of affliction"\textsuperscript{6} that provides the justification for them to see themselves as "poor." Furthermore, the prophetic eschatological theme of salvation for the poor\textsuperscript{7} is clearly reflected in their appropriation of Isa 61:1.\textsuperscript{8} For the Qumranites, as Seccombe notes, salvation was understood as "the property of the poor and of no others, and therefore, [they] had to see themselves as the poor since they were laying claim to Israel's salvation as their own."\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{1}1QpH 12:3, 6, 10; cf. Bammel, p. 897.
\textsuperscript{4}Gaster, Dead Sea Scriptures, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{6}1QS 5:6; 8:4.
\textsuperscript{7}1QM 10:1-12, 18; 13:1; 14:1.
\textsuperscript{9}Seccombe, p. 43.
In summary, the poor in the Old Testament referred to those in desperate material need. In the Psalter, it becomes clear that their distress involves economic and political hardships, with consequent oppression and suffering. Yet, the circle is wider than these social ills. It also includes sickness and different kinds of moral and religious conflicts (despair, guilt, fear, and persecution). The helplessness of the poor drove them to a dependent relationship with God—who consistently throughout the Old Testament is portrayed as the protector of the needy—for relief and vindication. This brings us to the most unique feature about the poor in Scripture: the merging of identity between the socially poor and the religiously pious, as especially reflected in the words *'ani* and *anan*/*ananim*.

In the latter chapters of Isaiah, "the poor" gains a collective sense, representing Israel in its desperate need of God's intervention. In the context of Isaianic prophecy the *ananim* are also envisioned as a group with a definite eschatological destiny. The social/religious and eschatological notions present in the concept of the poor and carried over into later intertestamental writings with further refining become the distinctive background against which the ministry of Jesus, particularly in the Gospel of Luke, must be understood. To identify these "poor" as a social class in the modern sense or as the proletariat, and then establish conclusions for modern ideological social action is an unwarranted oversimplification and a distortion of the biblical meaning.
The Poor in the Gospel of Luke

Significant exegetical tradition has generally spiritualized the meaning of the term poor. It has given to the notion an exclusively figurative and symbolical content, often considering the references to the poor in the Gospels almost exclusively in a "spiritual inward sense," thus minimizing the concrete socioeconomic dimension of poverty in view in Jesus' preaching. In their attempt to correct such a one-sided emphasis, the theologians of liberation, influenced by their Marxist-oriented analysis of society, tend to equate the poor with the modern concept of class. Therefore they read the same biblical texts as full of revolutionary import. Gutiérrez insists on a near-exclusive socioeconomic interpretation of the Lukan references to the poor, suggesting that in the third Gospel the term ptochos refers exclusively to those who live in a social situation characterized by misery, indigence, and oppression.

As pointed out in the second chapter of this work, three references to the poor in Luke are of particular significance for liberation theology's radical reading of the Gospel: first, the Nazareth Pericope (Luke 4:15-21); second, the Lukan version of the Beatitude "blessed are you the poor" (Luke 6:20); and finally the

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1William Manson, The Gospel of Luke (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930), pp. 41-42. For a critique of this tendency and bibliographical references, see McAffee Brown, Theology in a New Key, pp. 82-83; also Gort, "Gospel for the Poor?" p. 332.


3See Gutiérrez, A Theology, pp. 297-299; above, p. 239.
Luke's interest in the poor and the centrality he gives to them is widely noted, and it seems apparent that his Gospel contains an unquestionable emphasis on the "gospel for the poor." Furthermore, we do agree with Gutiérrez that "it is impossible to avoid the concrete and 'material' meaning which the term poor has for this evangelist." The question remains, however, as to whether it exhausts the meaning of the concept, or whether Luke, in fact, understands the issue of poverty in the same way as the theologians of liberation might like to see it. To this crucial question we devote the final pages of this discussion.

"Good News to the Poor"

On two critical occasions in the Gospel according to Luke, Jesus interprets his mission in terms of bringing "good news to the poor." At his inaugural sermon in Nazareth (Lk 4:16-30), which stands as a programmatic preface to his public ministry, and again...

1Despite the affirmation of importance and centrality of texts, however, they are hardly discussed in detail by Gutiérrez or any other liberation theologian. Dealing with the Lukan references to the poor, liberation theologians tend to string these texts together, interpreting them from the perspective of their precommitment to the contemporary Latin American situation, without due regard to their context or attention to their Old Testament and Jewish backgrounds.


3Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 298.

4Luke's narrative of Jesus' inaugural sermon at Nazareth is
in response to the question of the imprisoned Baptist (Luke 7:18-23, cf. Matt 11:2-6), Jesus announces his ministry as the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies of Isaiah, particularly of Isaiah 61:1. The age of fulfillment has dawned, and he has come to euaggelisasthai ptochois. ¹

This much is clear, but who are the poor to whom the good news is preached?² Are they the socially or economically poor?


² The identity of the poor in Luke has been variously understood. For a review of five main interpretations see Seccombee, Possessions and the Poor, pp. 23-34. Seccombe himself has strongly defended that "the poor" in Luke-Acts is an appellation consistently applied to Israel as a whole nation in need of God's salvation (21-96). One wonders, however, if Seccombe takes into serious account the universalistic and Gentile orientation of the Luke-Acts corpus. Furthermore, Seccombe's thesis seems correct from the perspective of the Jewish understanding of Isa 61:1-2, since they identified themselves as the beneficiary "in group" of the poor (see James A. Sanders, "From Isaiah 61 to Luke 4," in J. Neusner, ed. Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975],
Are they the spiritually poor? Or does the term in the mind of Luke somehow include all these dimensions? For liberation theologians, as we have noticed, there is no question that the term "poor" here is restrictive, applying only to those who are materially poor. The poor are exclusively a social group, the economically oppressed and deprived classes, and the liberation preached to them is the literal liberation from their situation. The ultimate implications of this understanding have been a classist and materialistic notion of the "gospel for the poor," which radically affects the identity and the mission of the Church.

One of the main evidences for the liberationist one-sided vision of the poor in Luke is the use of the word ptochos. The term occurs thirty-four times in the New Testament; twenty times in the Synoptics, and of these ten times in Luke. Out of these ten ptochos


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1 See Gort, pp. 323-354.
2 Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 305, n. 42.
references—which appear in eight separate Lukan contexts—in six
the word has an unquestionable, straightforward literal sense. In
these instances, Luke gives the impression that the ptochos was
someone completely unable to live without charitable assistance.¹

In four references, however,—Luke 4:18, 6:20, 7:22, and
14:21—the meaning of "the poor" is ambiguous. Should the clear
notion of economic destitution of the first group of texts, as
Gutierrez seems to suggest, determine the meaning of poverty where
the contexts indicate a more complex understanding? Caution here is
necessary. First of all, in each of these "ambiguous" cases the Lukan
texts take their distinct theological character from an
eschatological understanding of Isa 61:1-2.² Thus ptochos in these
references, as Crockett indicates, is dependent on the 'anawim of Isa
61:1-2 for its meaning.³

¹A poor widow with only one sixty-fourth of a denarius (Luke
21:2) or a beggar at a rich man's gate (16:20). The ptochos is the
recipient of alms (18:22; 19:20), on a level with the lame and the
blind who are unable to make any repayment for what they are given
(14:13). See Seccombe, p. 31. These notions are in complete harmony
with the original Greek meaning of ptochos, which denotes the idea of
complete destitution, forcing the poor to seek the help of others by

²See Dupont, Les Béatitudes, 2:90-142; Seccombe, pp. 35-59;
J. Schmitt, "L'oracle d'Is., LXI. et sa relecture par Jésus," RScRel

³Crockett, p. 351. Ptochos is the word used to translate the
'anawim of Isa 61:1, the very Hebrew word which lay behind the Greek
ptochos in Luke 4:18. When employed in the LXX as an equivalent of
'anaw (a word which has been adopted into the literature of a
theology of grace and which should not be stereotypically translated
"poor" in the modern sense), as Kelly remarks, ptochos, may not be
presumed to mean exclusively actual poverty (p. 18).
Second, although the word ptochos in Greek literature refers to an exclusively socioeconomic condition,¹ and in the Old Testament Septuagint as the translation for the five main Hebrew terms for poor the word takes on the nuance of the Jewish background. Ptochos, thus, in many instances, combines the ideas of weakness and reliance upon Yahweh and describes "those who are poor and dependent upon God's favor."² Furthermore, ptochos, the most common word in the LXX for poor (93 times), is used 39 times to translate 'ani, the Hebrew word which expresses the complex character of biblical poverty and covers a wide range of human suffering, not limited to economic deprivation.³

Finally, limiting the term ptochos to the literal meaning expressed in the Lukan texts which refer to the poor as those in need of charitable assistance, and thus regarding the ptochoi of Luke poor as those in need of charitable assistance, and thus regarding the ptochoi of Luke 4:18; 6:20, etc., as a particular social group, amounts to regard the poor as a group apart from Jesus and his disciples (a notion to which no liberation theologians would

¹See Hauck, ibid. In view of the metaphorical plasticity of the main Hebrew words it translates we should not presume to construe ptochos exclusively in the Greek sense, unless the context justifies it (see Kelly, p. 16).


subscribe), since as clearly indicated by the contexts of literal meaning, the former are alms-takers and the latter are alms-givers.\footnote{1}

Turning our attention to the Nazareth narrative, we must keep in mind that Luke 4:18, is in fact almost a direct quotation of Isa 61:1-2, the key text cited by Jesus as Scriptural authority for his messianic work. As indicated earlier, this Isaiahic passage is a descriptive climax of the prophet's vision of the glorious future for "the poor," mainly understood as Israel in its condition of desolation. The poverty of the 'anawim here, as in some of the Psalms, is described in quite a comprehensive sense.\footnote{2} The 'anawim of Isa 61:1-2 are not seen primarily in terms of socioeconomic status, but in connection with the great need and distress of those who are helpless and thrown empty-handed on God's mercy.

In Luke 4:18 the release motif of the Isaiahic prophecy is recast into the pattern of fulfillment. Jesus is, in fact, the eschatological prophet,\footnote{3} and his time is the era of salvation. His

\footnote{1}This is most strikingly illustrated in Mark 14:7: "For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them." For a useful corrective to the common idea that Jesus was penniless, see C. W. Buchanan, "Jesus and the Upper Class," NovTest 7 (1964):195-209; Seccombe, p. 32.

\footnote{2}See above, pp. 343-344.

mission, identified with the fulfillment of Isa 61:1-2, is expressed succinctly as euaggelisasthai ptochois. The "Good News," as defined by the rest of Luke 4:18, is made up of: freedom for the captives, restoring the sight of the blind, release of the oppressed, and proclamation of the year of the Lord's favor. The poor, seen as a group with a definite eschatological destiny, the object of the messianic age, are thus described as "the captive," "the blind," and "the oppressed." In an all inclusive sense, the poor—whoever they may be—are those who benefit from Jesus' mission and find release through him. The materially poor and destitute are undoubtedly included. In fact, the messianic age is revealed and typified in terms of acts of literal liberation.¹ Jesus' message is not merely a

¹Some scholars see Jesus' reference to the "acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:19) as a proclamation of a literal Jubilee, by which much of his ethics, particularly those relating to possessions and the poor, can be explained. See André Trocmé, Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution (Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1973), pp. 27ff. In the same vein, John Yoder, in his The Politics of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), concludes that the Year of Jubilee, as proclaimed by Jesus, is a mainly social event. Contrary to Yoder, Robert Sloan contends that the Year of the Jubilee as proclaimed by Jesus refers to both social and spiritual release. The Favorable Year of the Lord, A Study of Jubilary Theology in the Gospel of Luke (Austin: Schola Press, 1977). Some support for the Jubilee interpretation in Luke seems to be derived from A. Strobel's calculation that A.D. 26-27—taken as the year Jesus began his ministry—was a Jubilee year, the tenth after that instituted by Ezra. "Das apokalyptische Terminproblem in der sogen. Antrittspredigt Jesu (Lk 4,16-30)," TLZ 92 (1967):251-254; also Strobel, "Die Ausrufung des Jobeljahrs in der Nazarethpredigt Jesu," BZNW 40 (1972): 38-50. Significantly, the main liberation theologians do not explore the idea of a literal Jubilee. Writing from the perspective of liberation theology, Thomas Hanks, however, defends the thesis that in his appropriation of the notion, Jesus implied the socioeconomic revolution prescribed by the Jubilee (Opresión, Pobreza y Liberación [Miami: Editorial Caribe, 1982], pp. 142-179).

One may agree that the quotation in the Nazareth sermon

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proclamation in the predictive sense, i.e. that God is going to save, and bring deliverance,\(^1\) as in Isa 61:1-2. In effect, euaggelisasthai is not just speaking and preaching. It is a proclamation with full authority, in which signs and wonders follow the word. Jesus' message of "good news" imparts soteria and creates a healthy state in every respect. However, the liberation of the materially oppressed hardly exhausts the content of the good news. George Rice has pointedly indicated that the pericopes immediately following Jesus' programmatic sermon at Nazareth thematically interpret Luke's use of the Isaiah prophecy. The "release" (aphesin) to be achieved through probably evoked the idea of Jubilee, especially since eschatological and messianic interpretations of Isa 61:1-2 were current in the Palestinian milieu (1QH 18:14; 11QMelch; cf. Seccombe, pp. 52-55; Schweizer, Good News According to Luke, pp. 88-89). But, even if Jesus' ministry began with a Jubilee year (a theory which according to Schweizer "requires a good measure of fantasy," p. 89), it is unlikely that Jesus' reference to the "acceptable year of the Lord" was mechanically tied to the literal Jubilee year, or that he appealed to the fulfillment of legalistic Mosaic prescriptions as the requirement for entrance into the kingdom (cf. Yoder, The Politics of Jesus, p. 74). As Seccombe cogently argues: (1) there is no indication that Jesus demanded the most important and characteristic provision of the Jubilee: return to ancestral property; (2) the rejection of Jesus in the account of the Nazareth episode is not connected with any demand he made (as Hanks seems to suggest, Opression, Pobreza, pp. 149-150): it is a rejection of his person; (3) in a literal Jubilee only those who were holding the lands of others would be required to leave them; the dispossessed would be returning to their homes, and thus a liberation Jubilee could hardly be the explanation for the renunciation of property; and finally, (4) Luke makes nothing of the Jubilee, with all its economic stringencies, in a literal sense (pp. 55-56). It is more probable that the Jubilee motif behind Jesus' reading was related to the traditional imagery of the eschaton, as suggested by Isa 61:1-2 and in Qumran literature. Thus, "the time of salvation is the time of God's Jubilee. In proclaiming the latter Jesus proclaims the former" (Seccombe p. 56; Pilgrim, Good News, pp. 71-72).

\(^1\) See Friedrich Büchsel, "Euaggelizomai," TDNT, 2:720.
Jesus' ministry embraces an all-encompassing release. Release from (1) Satan's power (cf. 4:31-44), (2) the power of sin (cf. 5:1-32).  


2G. Rice, "Luke's Thematic Use of the Call to Discipleship," AUSS 19 (1981):51-58. In contrast to Matthew and Mark, Luke situates the call to the disciples, which ends with Peter's dramatic confession of sinfulness (Luke 5:1-11), and juxtaposed to the pericopes of the leper (5:12-16) and the paralytic (5:17:39), in a completely different chronological setting. In Luke these events follow Jesus' proclamation of the program of the kingdom at Nazareth. The common element in these narratives is the issue of Jesus confronting and forgiving sin (5:8; 12-16; 24). Thus, as Rice suggests, Luke, according to his perception of the Isa 61:1-2, arranges these pericopes as a thematic interpretation of the release (aphései) from sin to be achieved through Jesus (4:18). It should be
and (3) cultic tradition (5:33-6:11). What is involved in this triple liberation is not a question of a mere "spiritualization," but release in its fullest sense,—restoration of health, and freedom from the burdens which secluded, crushed, and destroyed human beings.

The object of the Good News

In the light of Luke's universalistic understanding of the "good news" and of his comprehensive view of the release brought


1G. Rice, "Luke 5:33-6:11: Release from Cultic Tradition" AUSS, 30 (1982):172-132. Also following the Nazareth event, the block of material at question here deals with the issue of fasting (5:27-32); Jesus' illustrations of the new patch/old garment and new wine/old wine skins (vs 36-38), and two sabbath pericopes (6:1-5; 6:6-11). The release motif is the logical connection between these pericopes. They are illustrations of Jesus' bringing release to those who were burdened and marginalized within the social-religious Jewish system, by the weight of man-made restrictions (see Rice, p. 132).

2Euaggelizomai is used 25 times in Luke's writings and consistently carries with it the idea of salvation (Friedrich, p. 709). Furthermore, there is no restriction in Luke's Gospel on the scope of this "evangelization" (Luke 4:43; 8:1; 9:6). In Acts the scope of "evangelization" is widened to include the Gentiles (Acts 8:4; 12, 25, 40; 11:20, 32; 14:7, 15, 21; 15:35; 16:10; 17:18). In Acts 8:35 the Ethiopian eunuch, scarcely a representative of an economically or socially deprived class, is "evangelized." In the light of these evidences, it is hardly probable that for Luke "the poor" who are the recipients of the "evangel" and the object of God's salvation were thought of as one social class (Seccombe. pp. 63-66).
by Jesus, it is quite improbable that he thought of Jesus' mission as oriented exclusively or even primarily to a particular social grouping.¹ Although "the poor" included those who were materially deprived, as Jeremias notes,"the circle of the poor is wider."² In fact, careful attention to Luke's reference to the poor in the crucial texts we are considering, shows that the emphasis is never placed on poverty as an economic condition but on its outcast status. On this basis, as Johnson has argued, the term "poor" in these Lukan passages functions more as a classification for a condition of being in the world than a description of economic situation of individuals.³

In Luke 4:18, 7:22 and 14:21, Johnson notes,⁴ the poor are listed with other unfortunates to whom the good news of God's

¹To see one social group as the "special addressees" of the "good news" Jesus proclaims is a contradiction to the very tenor of the narrative of Luke 4:16-30. As illustrated by the reference to Elijah and Elisha, who are said to help those outside Israel (Luke 4:24-27), Luke stresses the universal nature of Jesus' mission. The examples, which rebuke the parochially minded Jews of Nazareth and expose all ethnic and group solidarity, make evident that God's will to save through His prophet is wider than any bound and transcends human set limits. As Sanders notes, by the juxtaposition of the acts of Elijah and Elisha and Isa 61, Jesus clearly shows that the words meaning poor, captive, blind and oppressed do not apply exclusively to any in-group ("From Isaiah 61," p. 97). The universal character of Jesus' mission is precisely the cause of his rejection. See R. C. Tannehill, "The Mission of Jesus according to Luke IV, 16-30" in Jesus in Nazareth, ed., Erich Grüner et al. [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1972], p. 62; Sanders, p. 97).


³Johnson, The Literary Function, p. 132.

⁴Ibid., pp. 133-140.
visitation comes: the blind, the crippled, and the lame. Although these lists may at first appear to be random and without theological significance, this is not at all the case. A close analysis reveals that these groupings, i.e., the crippled, lame and blind--excluding the poor--are precisely the types of "blemish" found in Lev 21:21-18 and described as prohibited from participating in the cult of Israel.\(^1\) With additional evidences from Qumran,\(^2\) these unfortunates listed by Luke were not only weighted with misery, but, outcast, rejected from full participation in the life of the people.

Significantly, although the poor were not counted among the ritually blemished,\(^3\) the Lukan Jesus consistently included them in each of these lists, suggesting that in the eyes of men they were just as rejected as the other fringe groups. This seems precisely to be the dominant motif undergirding Luke's thematic references to "the poor," they are the marginalized people within the Jewish system. For

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\(^1\) Cf. 2 Sam 5:8; see Johnson, p. 133.

\(^2\) In Qumran, the crippled, the blind and physically blemished were excluded from the community. In the Scroll of the Rule, "every person smitten in his flesh, paralysed in his feet or hands, lame or blind or deaf . . . is unable to stand firm in the midst of the Congregation" (IQSa 2:5-6). According to the War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness, "no lame man, nor blind, nor crippled" was worthy to join in the final eschatological war between the elect and hosts of Belial or take part in the Messianic Banquet (1QM 7:4-5). Within Palestinian society itself, under the influence of the Jewish dogma of retributive punishment, lepers were outcasts and the blind, deaf, dumb and beggars were forbidden to enter the holy place in the temple (see Pilgrim, Good News, p. 74).

\(^3\) In rabbinic literature of the time, however, poverty stood under a cloud of suspicion, and the term 'annym was used as a label of opprobrium for those too poor to keep the law (see Bammel, pp. 901-902; see Quelich, p. 69, Pilgrim, pp. 37-38).
Luke, "the poor" are not merely those without material possessions. Taken in a very broad sense, the *ptochoi* include the despised, the ill-treated, the helpless, the disreputable and marginalized by men. The term is descriptive of all those who lived on the margin of society, economically, socially, ethically, and religiously, and consequently were in most need of divine help. To these déclassés, in complete harmony with the Old Testament, Jesus shows preferential solicitude. To them the good news is proclaimed, offering acceptance, a new status and worth before God and humanity.

It seems that the decisive confirmation for the understanding of "the poor" as a broad characterization of the outcast groups emerges from a close analysis of those who gathered around Jesus. Here, it becomes clear that while Luke is silent regarding the poverty of those who responded to Jesus' proclamation, he consistently makes the spotlight fall on their outcast status, and this under his favorite rubric of "sinners and tax-collectors" (Luke 5:5-30; 7:34; 15:1-2). In fact, Luke frames the entire public ministry of Jesus within two christological affirmations: the Son of Man came to "call sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32), and to "save the lost" (19:10).

Jesus not only saw his mission as being to the "lost and sinners" but also won the reputation of being the "friend of the

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1Although this theme finds expression in a number of Lukan texts (cf. Luke 7:36-50; 18:9-14; 19:1-10), its central exhibit occurs in Luke 15, a chapter described by Schürmann as "the gospel within the gospel" (Das Lukasevangelium, p. 85). Here the Lukan Jesus presents a set of parables ("The Lost Sheep," "The Lost Coin" and "the Prodigal Son") in defense of his association with and offer of salvation to the outcasts.
tax-collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34). Although he doubtless was concerned with the poor and down trodden, the charge against him, it should be noted, was not that he loved the economically impoverished, but that he associated with the "sinners." The designation "sinner," however, as Jeremias notes, in the world of Jesus had a quite definite ring. It included people who were notoriously marked by religious ignorance, lumped together as the 'amme ha 'aretz. Their poverty consisted not so much in economic deprivation as in the fact that they did not know or practice the complicated provisions of the law, and thus were rejected by the pious representatives of the Jewish religious society (John 7:49; Luke 18:9-14). Furthermore, as

1 Jeremias, New testament Theology, p. 109.

2 'Amme ha 'aretz is a name which carries a derogatory connotation in rabbinical literature, meaning the "common people," the masses, generally the uneducated people who did not belong to the established religious order. Jeremias, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 256-257; Herman L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch, 5 vols. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1922-1955), 2:494. See also the appendix by G. F. Moore, "the am ha-ares (the people of the land) and the haberim (associates)," in Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, The Beginnings of Christianity, 4 vols. (London: Macmillan Co. 1942), 1:439-445; S. Zeitlin, "The Am Haarez," JQR 23 (1932):45-61. E. P. Sanders rejects Jeremias' identification of the "sinners" with the 'amme ha 'aretz and argues that they were the truly wicked. Jesus and Judaism (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 174-211). There is no need to enter into this debate here, since both agree that the designation "sinners" was not related to economic conditions.


4 For rabbinic passages attesting the contempt toward those uneducated in the Law, the ordinary, untutored people, the 'am ha'aretz, see Strack and Billerbeck, Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, 2:494. The "poor" who were ignorant of the Law were already a problem.
indicated by rabbinic sources, among the outcasts we find those engaged in despised trades, or occupations which in public opinion carried a social stigma. The "tax-collectors," for example, who could certainly be called "rich" in economic terms, had money but, because of their disreputable occupation, lacked acceptance. Thus "it was with horror that Jesus accepted a toll collector into the inner circle of his companions and that he announced the message of in Jeremiah's time. See Jer 5:4 where the prophet seeks to excuse them. Cf. Raymond Brown, The Gospel of John (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1981), p. 325, n. 49; Joachim Jeremias, Jerusalem, p. 259. According to Hillel, "no 'am ha-aretz is religious" (Moore Judaism, p. 160). From the perspective of the Pharisees virtually all the 'amme ha 'aretz would be sinners (see Jeremias, "Zölner und Sünder," ZNW 30 (1931):293-300), and to sit in the synagogue close to the 'amme ha 'aretz was considered one of the causes of death (Moore, "The am ha-aretz" p. 443). Hardly surprising, there was among the Pharisees the belief that they were not obligated to love the 'amme ha 'aretz (Strack and Billerbeck, 4:840-841).

1 Jeremias, New Testament Theology, pp. 109-111. In his Jerusalem (pp. 301-316), Jeremias presents a lengthy treatment of those occupations which were considered disreputable in the eyes of the Jews. Among others, physicians, shepherds, tailors, barbers, butchers, and especially the tax-collectors--because being engaged in occupations which, according to common thought, led to degradation, immorality, or dishonesty--were avoided and condemned (for the rabbinic sources see also Billerbeck 2:113ff). The shepherds in the story of Jesus' birth probably foreshadow the Lukan pattern of God's invitation to the outcast. Despised and considered as disreputable (Jeremias, ibid.; L. Schottroff and W. Stegemann, Jesus von Nazareth [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1978], p. 25), they are the last people one would have thought worthy to witness the birth of Messiah (Luke 2:8-20) and hear the angelic proclamation of the "good news of great joy" (2:10). Nevertheless they stand as representatives of the "poor," those to whom the good news is extended.


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salvation to those despised by the people."¹ This association with the religiously and socially ostracized was at the heart of the offence caused by Jesus' ministry in the eyes of the "pious." Yet, Luke leaves no doubt that it is precisely to these people, broadly characterized as "poor," that the good news of salvation is addressed and they are the ones who responded to it.

To understand Jesus' association with these people in terms of political and sectarian partisanship, or to conceive his followers as members of the proletariat, is not only an anachronist conclusion, but above all a failure to grasp the basic religious motivation and vision of Jesus' proclamation. Besides, according to the unanimous testimony of the Gospels, Jesus, from the beginning to the end of his ministry was tempted to become a leader of a social revolution,² which in the mind of the writers could have been successful. This option, however, he consistently laid aside. Admittedly, Jesus shed critical light on the social injustices of his day, and relativized all the ruling powers,³ but liberation theology's picture of him as a champion of the dispossessed proletariat is nowhere near the truth. In fact, to transform Jesus into a "political rebel," a forerunner of modern liberationist movements, or a model for radical Christians on

¹Jeremias, "Zöllner und Sünder," p. 300
³See Cassidy, Jesus, Politics and Society, pp. 20-62.
the basis of his interest in the poor, is a flagrant misapprehension of his ministry and of the textual evidence.

Blessed are the poor

From liberation theology's understanding of the Lukan version of the beatitude: "makarioi hoi ptochoi hoti humetera estin he basileia tou theou" (Luke 6:20), two main notions emerge, converging to strengthen the cause of liberation.

First, as particularly noticeable in Gutiérrez' three-page analysis of the text, a new radical interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' words occurs. The poor, understood exclusively as the economically deprived, are blessed because they need and welcome change. Thus, as Neuhaus, notes, "they are the avant-garde of the revolution."¹ Second, the interpretation of the text seems to supply liberation theology with the idealistic view that the poor are a morally superior group. Dussel has claimed that since the kingdom of God stands in contrast to the prevailing system and since the poor are not a constituent part of the system, they are the people of God and therefore "the active subjects and carriers of the kingdom of God."² Quoting the beatitude in Luke 6:20, he adds,

For inasmuch as the poor are not subjects of the system, . . . they are the subject-carriers of the kingdom who

¹Neuhaus, "Liberation as Program and Promise," p. 155. For Croatto, the beatitudes convey God's call to the process of liberation. They are "a summons to the oppressed to recognize the 'signs of times,' and full of hope, to set out on the long march to liberation" (Exodus, p. 57, cf. above).

²Dussel, "The Kingdom of God and the Poor," p. 124
co-labor to build it. By being oppressed (and by that non-sinners, thus righteous) and active liberators (as members of the people), the poor are the subjects of the kingdom.

It appears unquestionable that Luke's rendition of the beatitude is less "spiritual" and more "earthly" than the Matthean more spiritualized version. Particularly significant in contrast to Matthew, who describes Jesus directing his blessing to the "poor in spirit" and to "those who hunger and thirst after righteousness," Luke's short form "poor" and "ones who hunger," defined by the adverbial nun (now), adds special emphasis to the realism of the Lukan narrative of the beatitudes. These characteristics which mark the form and content of Luke's version of the Lord's sermon seem to stand in the way of any easy spiritualization of the notion of poverty and hunger. The question remains whether the liberationist ideological reading is validated by the text.

The makarioi hoi ptochoi which opens Luke's Sermon on the Plain (6:17ff) clearly continues the theme of God's extraordinary visitation to the poor introduced in the infancy narrative and thematically presented in the Nazareth discourse (4:18-19; cf. Isa

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4See below, pp. 383ff.
61:1-2). The beatitude, it should be noted, clearly specifies the listeners as the disciples—mathetai—whom Jesus addresses with the directness of the second person. The implication is that Jesus has primarily in view here those who have already decided to become his followers. The promise of salvation to the poor in Luke 6:20, as Schweizer notes, is addressed to disciples in the narrower sense, those who have given up everything and suffer persecution. They are the special recipients of the beatitude and the ones who are addressed as "you poor." Therefore, although we admit that poor/hungry/weeping of the first three beatitudes may very well be the literally poor, the blessing—whose object is the basileia—must be strictly kept within the context of discipleship and response to Jesus' ministry and call to the kingdom. As the fourth beatitude and the parallel woe indicate, they are those who suffer on account of their discipleship. Any extrapolation to fit the text into a

1 Luke 6:20. While Luke often uses the term mathetai to refer to the comparatively small group who accompanied Jesus (Marshall, p. 242), here, as indicated in vs. 17 ("a large crowd of his disciples was there"), the word appears to represent many more than the Twelve, covering all who are identified with him (Marshall, Commentary on Luke, p. 242; Paul Minear, "Jesus' Audiences, According to Luke," NovTest 16 [1974]:104.


3 Pilgrim, pp. 76-78.

4 While placing all the emphasis on the first three beatitudes and identifying the poor as those who hunger and weep now, liberation theologians overlook completely the fourth beatitude which is far more specific: "Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man" (Luke 6:22).
political frame is much less than obvious interpretation.

We do agree with Gutiérrez that "it is knocking on the wrong door to wish to salvage the spiritual nature of the Christian message by trying to rid it of the clear and direct meaning of material poverty in the Bible as a determinate, concrete, human social condition." At the same time, we hold that to affirm or suggest that the poor qua poor, because of outward circumstances, automatically share in the blessings of the kingdom, is an undue universalization and politicization of the biblical message. In the context of the beatitudes, the kingdom belongs to the poor because they are responsive. "The poor" here are precisely those who have responded to God's gracious offer on their behalf and have received the good news of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus.

Moreover, the beatitudes are marked by an unavoidable

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1 Gutiérrez, The Power of the Poor, p. 141.

2 Ibid. p. 140. For Gutiérrez "to assert that the proper, original message of the Beatitudes refers first of all to the materially poor ... is a recognition that God is God and that God loves the poor with all freedom and gratuity" (ibid). Shall we conclude that anyone who is literally poor is included in the kingdom, by virtue of his poverty? Padilla correctly remarks that "neither the poor nor the rich have a part in the kingdom unless, regardless of their deprivation or material possessions, they are "poor in spirit and as such totally dependent on God's grace" ("New Testament Perspectives," p. 59).

3 This is evident in the parable of the Great Supper. Although they are not the only ones to be invited (14:15-20)--in fact, "the poor" form a "second" list of invitees--they are, however, the ones who respond to the invitation (14:21-24). Furthermore, as Hoyt argues, on the basis of context and philology, the expression "the poor are being evangelized" (Luke 7:22), really means: "the poor are responding" (pp. 152-153).
religious character which resists any attempt of easy politization. The very term makarios denotes that particular joy which results from the participation in God's salvation and rule. Jesus' statement of blessing is, in effect, as Soebe notes, "prädikativer Heilsspruch." Although the text makes clear that human needs will be met by the fullness of divine salvation, the thought is primarily eschatological and spiritual—not that the poor will become rich instead of poor, for "a simple reversal of worldly position is not envisaged.

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3See Talbert, Reading Luke, p. 70. The content of the beatitudes, Talbert remarks, may be in stark contrast with the painful reality of the present, but in the beatitudes in the New Testament are eschatological, they see the present in light of the ultimate future. It is what will ultimately be, the final outcome of history, that justifies the utterance of blessedness (ibid).

4Marshall, The Gospel of Luke, p. 250. To avoid the canonization of poverty, and at the same time retain a literal interpretation of the poor, Gutiérrez affirms that the poor are blessed because "the elimination of the exploitation and poverty that prevent them from being fully human has begun" (A Theology p. 298). In the political sense, as Gutiérrez understands it, his affirmation, as Fierro notes, must be seen as rhetorical and precritical, for "where exactly do we find that 'elimination'? Are we to assume that the poor of Jesus' day were made that happy by contemplating an elimination of poverty which has not yet taken place two thousand years later?" (The Militant Gospel, pp. 325-326). Fierro concludes by affirming that Gutiérrez' interpretation of Luke 6:20 "does not correspond to historical reality. If it has meaningfulness at all, it is purely a mystical one" (p. 326).
The Lukan beatitudes are devoid of sheer proletarian protest and of any ideological exaltation of poverty. Furthermore, the antithesis between the blessings given to the poor and the woes leveled at the rich (6:24-26)--which follows a characteristic theme of Luke's Gospel\(^1\)--must not be seen in terms of the Hellenistic concept of *peripêteia*, the great reversal of conditions\(^2\) or liberationist secularized eschatology which transforms the poor into the "subject carriers of the kingdom." Close attention to the double pattern of reversal of the beatitude reveals that the situation of "the poor" will be reversed by God (6:23) in the future, as the contrast with the rich/now indicates.

It should also be noted that in none of the Lukan illustrations involving the rich are they condemned because of their exploitation or abuse of the poor.\(^3\) The terms rich and poor demonstrate above all a differing attitude toward God. Whereas


\(^3\) This point is clear in the Lukan Parable of Lazarus and Dives (16:19-31). "The point of the story is not the failure of the rich man in relation to the poor, but the ineluctable alienation of his life, and that of all rich men, from the sphere of God" (Bammel, "Ptochos," p. 906). Thus, the partial or total renunciation that in Luke is demanded from the rich, it consistently is less for the sake of the poor than for that of the salvation of the owner (ibid., p. 907). In Luke's Gospel both the renunciation of wealth (18:29-30; cf. Mark 10:29-30) and its prudent use (16:1-9) are motivated by recognition of its relative unimportance when compared to the abiding values of the kingdom. In the deep level, in Luke's lament over the plight of the rich, it is primarily (though not exclusively) the spiritual dimension that is at issue (Talbert, p. 71; Tripole, p. 652).
"the rich" are blamable because of their sense of self-security and rejection of God's invitation, "the poor," in harmony with the Old Testament dual notion of poverty, are those who are totally dependent on God, and in him they find their only hope. The rich, on the other hand, are those who enjoy their paraklesis (consolation) now (6:24). Their paraklesis stands in direct contrast to the Kingdom of God. Here Luke seems to point the reader back to Simon, who awaited and received in the person of Jesus the paraklesis of Israel (Luke 2:25ff). The rich are those self-satisfied who do not await such consolation and feel no need for the comfort extended by the good news, because they have one of their own. In contrast to the poor, they are filled and "laugh haughtily," but trusting only in what they have now, they stand under God's judgment and have nothing to hope for. They will, thus, experience God's reversal. In conclusion, it must be stressed that it is not just poverty or riches per se that is blessed or condemned, but poverty in the context of trust in God.


3"Laugh" gelontes, in 6:25b, is not a neutral term; it generally denotes an evil kind of laughter; the laughter of derision which looks down on the fate of enemies and is in danger of becoming boastful and self-satisfied (cf. K. Rengstorff, "Gelao," TDNT 1:660; Dupont, Beatitudes, 3:66-69; Talbert, p. 72; Johnson, p. 135).

4Talbert summarizes this point well: "Why are the poor (powerless), whose only hope is God, blessed? It is because, trusting only in God, they belong to the sphere of God's rule (vs. 20b). Why,
and riches in the context of rejection of God. The two go hand in hand for Luke.

The Magnificat: the \textit{p\oeil\al\ation of the Towly

As we have pointed out earlier, the theme of the political reversal of the situation of the poor is further contended on the basis of the interpretation of the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). The liberationist notion of God as a "moral dualist," associated with the poor and oppressed in opposition to the rich, finds in the words of Mary a decisive confirmation. Conceiving her song\textsuperscript{1} as a revolutionary or some kind of Zealot hymn, "des militants sudaméricains se réjoissent de ce que le Magnificat célèbre le renversement des dictateurs et des grands possédants de ce monde et proclame le nouveau pouvoir des sans-pouvoir qui triomphe de la violence des puissants."\textsuperscript{2}

when such people hunger and weep and are persecuted, are they to be congratulated? It is because in God's ultimate victory they will be favored by the structures of the New Age. The type of persons described in 6:20-23 is to be extolled because of what they have now--God himself--and because of what they will ultimately have--support from the structures of life in the kingdom of God" (p. 72).

\textsuperscript{1}The issue of the original ascription of the Magnificat, whether to Mary or Elizabeth, as well as the question of its origin, is not important to us in this study. See Stephen Benko, "The Magnificat, a History of the Controversy," JBL 81 (1967):263-275.

While it would be easy to over-spiritualise the meaning of Mary's song and ignore the implications of how the dawning of the kingdom of God should bring about political and social transformation, bringing the ordinary life of mankind into line with the will of God, a literalist interpretation of the pericope, on the other hand, would lead to the conclusion that the song envisages "une revolution catastrophique dans laquelle les prolétaires remportent un succès éclatant aux dépends de la classe privilégiée." It is the core of the Magnificat, with its martial atmosphere contrasting the different fates of the proud/mighty/rich (scattered, put down and sent away empty) and the lowly/hungry (exalted and filled) that captures the interest of liberation theologians.

The Magnificat, which can be considered a literary mosaic drawn from various parts of the Old Testament, falls into two major divisions or stanzas. Verses 46-50 express Mary's personal experience, while vss. 51-55 describe God's action for those whom she represents. Stanza one of Mary's song thus speaks of God's mighty

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2See Schüermann, p. 76; Marshall, p. 85.
3Hamel, ibid.
act for one woman, the handmaiden chosen by the Lord. In vs. 48 the speaker rejoices "for he [God] has regarded the tapeinosin of his servant." The nature of Mary's tapeinosin here, generally translated as low/lowly/humble estate, has been a source of contention. While some understand her tapeinosin as "humility," a moral and religious virtue, others argue that the word here means "lowness," placing thus the emphasis on the socio-economic status of the Virgin. The implications of these opposing interpretations decisively influence the understanding of the meaning of tapeinous in vs. 52, since there is in the Magnificat a parallel connection between Mary's tapeinosis and the situation of the community which she represents.

Although both views, to some extent, can be supported by

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1See A. Gelin, pp. 95-96. Mowinckel sustains that tapeinosis came to mean a "religious ideal of humbleness." The Psalms in Israel Worship (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 1:145. M. E. Isaacs, "Mary in the Lucan Infancy Narrative," pp. 80-95. S. Iglesias denies that New Testament usage of the noun tapeinosis carries this shade of meaning (Los canticos del evangelio de la infancia según Lucas (Madrid: Instituto Francisco Suárez, 1983), p. 133; see J. G. Koontz "Mary's Magnificat," BibSac 116 (1959):336-349. It should be noted that in the context of vs. 48: "For he [God] has looked (epeblepsen) upon the tapeinosin of his servant," the interpretation of tapeinosis as a primary reference to virtue is very unlikely. "To see the affliction" of the faithful in the Old Testament--an action generally attributed to Yahweh--has always a soteriological connotation (cf. Gen 29:32; Gen 31:42; Exod 3:7; 4:31; Deut 26:7; 1 Sam 1:11; 9:16; Ps 16:12, etc). Since Mary puts emphasis on the salvific character of God's action, it is very unlikely that her tapeinosis was a moral virtue, for from a virtue one hardly has anything to be saved.

2Grundmann sees tapeinosis as an indication of Mary's lowly state in the eyes of the world (p. 21); Marshall, p. 82; Walter L. Liefeld, The Expositors Bible Commentary: Luke, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 836. Hoyt argues that Mary's tapeinosis indicates "a social situation depicting a class system" (pp. 181-182).
Mary's self-description, any one-sided emphasis here fails to take into account the whole picture. Those who translate tapeinosis in vs 48 as "humility" overlook the fact that the Magnificat does not place primary emphasis on Mary's attitude but on her condition. This, however, must not be limited to a mere inferior economic and social position. Surely the Virgin sings of nothing except her low status (vs.49) and God's gracious initiative towards her (vss. 49-50). The fact that God has chosen the humble "handmaid" of no account in the eyes of the world to bear the long-expected Messiah is the reason for her thankful joy. The emphasis, however, it should be noted, lies on the insignificance of the Lord's "slave girl" in comparison with "the great things" that God's grace has done. Mary's tapeinosis retains the basic idea of an afflictive condition, but this is not primarily attributed to any external cause. It expresses above all

1 Tapeinosis occurs 40 times in the Septuagint (H. H. Esser, "Tapeinos," Dictionary of New Testament Theology, 2:260. It generally means "humble, difficult situation," "lowliness" (Grundmann, p. 10), and appears in different contexts: in reference to the oppressed situation of Israel in Egypt (Deut 26:7, cf. Exod 3:7); oppression by foreign nations (1 Sam 9:16; Jer 1:3, 7, 9; Ps 135:23). Frequently it describes the situation of individuals: Hagar, when expelled by Sarah (Gen 16:11); unloved Leah (Gen 29:32); Jacob serving Laban (Gen 31:42); Joseph in Egypt (Gen 41:52); the childlessness of Hannah (1 Sam 1:11); David in his flight from Absalom (2 Sam 16:12). In the Psalms tapeinosis is used to describe the threat of death (Ps 9:14; cf. 89:3); it has its cause in sin (Ps 25:18); persecution (31:8, cf. 110:153). In Isa 53:8, tapeinosis describes the oppression of the Servant of the Lord (see Grundmann, p. 11). In all these cases one can detect the multiplicity of meanings of tapeinosis (p. 130). It is clear that there is a predominance of the idea of afflictive situation, but the causes are diverse. See L. F. Rivera, "El concepto 'tapeinos' en el Magnificat," RevBibl 20 (1950):70-72; Salvador M. Iglesias, Los Cánticos del Evangelio de la Infancia, p. 130.

2 Significantly, the reversal which confers on Mary a new
the consciousness of her own insignificance and helplessness.

Referring to her "low estate" and describing herself as "handmaid" (i.e., female servant), Mary associates herself with all the memories of the 'anawim evoked by those terms and stresses her entire dependence on the gratuity of God's salvation. From this perspective, the tapeinosis of vs. 48, as Tannehill notes, is a central concept in the Magnificat. It becomes the starting point for God's eschatological exaltation of the lowly, which is already visible in Mary, and will extend through Jesus to those who stand poor before God.

From the initial personal note (vss. 46-49), the hymn makes a subtle transition and moves to the thought that the grace conferred upon Mary is only a small segment of the larger scope of God's redemptive activity. Stanza two of the Magnificat (vss. 51-55) expands the horizon to speak of God's eschatological action for the poor, which is expressed in a clear reversal: while the mighty are cast down from their thrones the humble are lifted up. In vs. 52 we find status is not expressed in terms of a new social situation: "From now on all generations will call me blessed (makariousin)" (vs. 48, cf. 45). The opposite of her tapeinosis is above all her role as the mother of the Messiah, and participation in the messianic salvation (Iglesias, p. 139; Seccombe, p. 75).

\footnote{The title she enjoys, "servant" (vs. 48), corresponds to that of the chosen people (John Navone, Themes in Luke [Rome: Gregorian University, 1970], p. 103). The expression "my Savior" (vs. 46) places Mary in line with the Old Testament piety (Hab 3:18; Ps 24:5; 25:5; Mic 7:7; cf. G. Fohrer, "Sotér," TDNT 7:1012ff.); Brown gives detailed attention to the expression in the Magnificat which reflects the language of the 'anawim (The Birth of the Messiah, pp. 357-361).}

\footnote{Tannehill, p. 272.}
a second reference to the "humble," this time in antithetic parallelism with the "proud," rulers," and "rich":

rulers dethroned  x  poor raised
hungry filled  x  rich sent away

At this point it becomes clear that God's visitation to the tapeinosis of Mary stands as an example or as a realization of God's visitation to Israel to fulfill the promises made to Abraham (vs. 55). The "raising up" of Mary from lowliness, expressed in her new status as makaria (vss. 42, 45), reflects God's normal way of proceeding in favor of the humble and lowly, which reverts the normal human system of values. One reversal thus indicates the other or, as Talbert says, in the one small event the greater event lies hidden.

Who are the "humble" of vs. 52 and the "rich" of vs. 53? How shall we understand the reversal of fortunes? As Hamel observes in reference to Luke 1:52, "le texte est volontairement générique et...

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1 See Dupont, Les beatiudes, 3:191; Iglesias, pp. 141-144. In her election Mary recognizes the paradoxical character of God's action and sings her admiration for God's grandeur, "qui agit continuellement de façon étonnante, si différente de ce que les hommes attendent. Il prend soin des petits" (Hamel, pp. 70-71). Contrary to man's success-oriented way of thinking, which usually glorifies the powerful and rich of the world, God takes the opposite course. As consistently indicated in the Old Testament, he is pleased in electing those of no account and exalting the small and insignificant (cf. Deut 7:7-8; Judg 6:15; 1 Sam 2:4-9; 1 Sam 16:6-13, cf., 17:13; 2 Sam 22:28; Ps 18:27; 33:19; 112:4-7; 138:6; Isa 26:5-7).

2 Talbert, p. 24; Tannehill, pp. 263-275.
The word for humble/poor here is not *ptochoi*, but *tapeinoi*, a term with a history extending from the classical period. In Greek literature, when used without any qualification, *tapeinos* generally indicated lowliness in terms of the structures of society. In the Septuagint the word and its cognates translate the main Hebrew terms for poor and present a full range of meaning. If, on the one hand it emphasizes the "lowly" or "humble" aspects of poverty and is used together with *ptochos* to describe the downtrodden and oppressed, on the other, under the influence of Old Testament theocentric emphasis, *tapeinos* gains a positive sense and describes the righteous and occurs generally in expression of belief in Yahweh. In the New Testament the adjective *tapeinos*, when used without any qualification (as in Matt 11:29), often indicates the objective state of a person, his low birth, and humble social status; however, "no economic connotation is intrinsic to the term apart from contexts." It seems without doubt that the Magnificat addresses the

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1 Hamel, p. 75.


3 See Grundmann, pp. 9-10; Líaño, "Los Pobres en el Antiguo Testamento," p. 165; Rauder, pp. 260-261; George, p. 388; Schürmann, Lukas, pp. 74-75.


materially poor and oppressed,¹ and unquestionably "trouvait écho parmi ces petits gens,"² those who live in expectance of God's salvation. But that is not all. The poor are specified as those who "fear God" (vs 50), indicating a responsiveness to his word. In fact, the Magnificat, as well as the themes in the infancy narratives,³ reflect a whole stream of Old Testament piety, the piety of the 'anawim, the "Poor Ones,"⁴ whose status is one of both social and spiritual poverty. Furthermore, in the same way we should also keep in mind that the scattering of the mighty is neither a mere sociological question⁵ nor is it achieved by active revolutionary strategy.

¹Brown, The Birth of the Messiah, p. 363. In fact, according to W. D. Davies the Magnificat reflects at least three of the typical evils of the first century: (1) foreign domination; (2) the scattering of the people, and (3) oppression by the wealthy (Invitation to the New Testament [Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1966], p. 156).

²Hamel, p. 74.

³Mary, as the example par excellence of those who believe, the pious among Israel, is not alone in this role in the Lukian infancy narrative. Zachariah and his wife Elizabeth, described as "righteous" and "blameless" in the sight of God (vs. 6), the shepherds, Simeon, and Anna, who are righteous and devout, living in patient expectation of the imminent consolation/redemption of Israel (2:25-38), share a common piety (Brown, Mary in the New Testament, p. 143). As Pilgrim remarks, "Each of the actors and actresses in the Lukian Christmas pageant are appropriately cast in the role of the anawim" (Good News, p. 78).


⁵Hoyt argues that when tapeinous is placed in the context of dynastas, the ascription of a sociological meaning of tapeinous is strengthened (p. 182). Unquestionably Luke dramatizes the theme of reversal throughout his gospel, where the rich and powerful are frustrated. In Luke, however, the plousioi (rich) are much more than mere possessors of material good (cf. F. Hauck and W.
It is precisely in this connection that the crux of the problem lies and where liberation theologians overstate their case, tending to use the theme of salvation of the poor ideologically. In Luke's understanding, God's social revolution, "like the conception of Jesus, is not the perfection of the human by human striving but the result of the divine breaking into history."¹ It should be noted that while vss. 51-53 announce a change in relation to power—the poor, the powerless, and the humble are exalted, while the rich, the strong and the proud are overthrown—there is no contextual evidence that this change comes as a result of the action of the poor. On the contrary, the Magnificat is build around a set of verbs of action whose only subject is God himself. It is God "who has scattered the

¹See Talbert, p. 24. The expectation of a reversal of the social order was a widespread phenomenon, as was the universal longing of minorities under oppression (see J. Massyngbaerde Ford, My Enemy Is My Guest, Jesus and Violence in Luke [Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1984], pp. 13-36; Marshall, p. 84 Schweizer, p. 35). The Magnificat seems to reflect this reversal-of-fortune motif. Vss. 52 and 53, particularly, refer to political and social relationships. But here, the exaltation of the lowly, already visible in Elizabeth and Mary, will achieve its goal in Jesus himself, and through him among those who stand poor before God (Luke 14:11; 18:14).
proud" (vs. 51b) and "brought down rulers" (vs. 52a). The recipients of this display of strength are "those who fear him" (vs. 50b). Furthermore, the reference is primarily eschatological. While the transformation of society at large awaits the eschaton, Jesus, however, has inaugurated provisional ethics. Calling "the poor" into a new community, he has established a new way of life, a new and revolutionary way of dealing with poverty and injustice. As Yoder so well puts it:

He gave them a new way to deal with offenders--by forgiving them. He gave them a new way to deal with violence--by suffering it. He gave them a new way to deal with money--by sharing it. He gave them a new way to deal with problems of leadership--by drawing upon the gift of every member, even the most humble. He gave them a new way to deal with a corrupt society--by building a new order, not smashing the old.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages we have tried to reflect critically on liberation theology's attempt to reformulate theology from the "perspective of the poor." By alerting Christians to the unjust reality of the continent and by showing how these realities are

1 This is indicated by the prophetic aorists: Plummer, p. 33.

2 Yoder, The Original Revolution, Essays on Christian Pacifism (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), p. 29. By siding with those who were despised, powerless, unworthy, marginalized and needy, Jesus gave them a new significance and value. Calling them into a new community, he established for his Church a revolutionary paradigm. The Christian community is invited faithfully to reflect in its life God's attitude which reverses the normal human system of values. In grateful response to the divine calling, the disciples, who have themselves experienced Christ's grace towards their own "poverty," extend their own generosity and preferential love towards those in greatest need. This option, however, is not politically or ideologically motivated, thus it is open to all who are needy.
incompatible with the Judaeo-Christian tradition, liberation theology has challenged not only the individualistic ethic of Latin American Christianity but also the often aloof and indifferent attitude of traditional theology.

In the search for relevance and effectiveness in the service of the poor, Latin American liberation theology has not been, however, free from ambiguities and risks. If on the one hand the liberationist concept of the poor, framed within the adopted Marxist vision of society, has, to some extent, brought to light the economic realities behind the Latin American social process, it poses on the other hand, because it is absolutized, serious dangers for theological reflection and Christian life. While it decisively contributes to reduce theology to the pole of political praxis, it also leads it to a superficial treatment of theological themes and Christian doctrines which are molded to fit the purposes of the intended social change. This is particularly obvious in the liberationist immanentist view of salvation, acceptance of a functionalist anthropology and secularized eschatology, which fail to do justice to the biblical teachings.

Furthermore, by challenging Latin American Catholicism to shake off its traditional indifference toward social realities and its conservative socio-political alliances, liberation theologians have positively convoked not only their own Church but Christians in general to turn their concern to the poor and oppressed. In the attempt to enlist the strong religious sentiments of Latin Americans in the pursuit of justice, liberation theologians have often
permitted that political and ideological expectations determine the agenda of the believing community. Thus, while urging the Church to transcend the traditional paternalistic and charitable approach to the poor, the poor have been transformed into an ideological category. The "option for the poor," formulated within the Marxist dialectic of history, tends to be expressed in terms of "option for the proletariat" and class struggle. The freedom of the Church thus is once again threatened, and the "church of the poor" is in danger of being transformed into the church of a radical social group.

Liberation theology's rereading of the Bible from the perspective of the poor has unquestionably awakened the theological community to crucial hermeneutical issues and reopened the search for ways to actualize Christian truth in the political dimension. Its emphasis on concern for the poor as a central biblical theme has also voiced a compelling appeal to theological reflection and Christian conscience. By giving political analysis precedence over biblical theology, however, liberation theology tends to accommodate Scripture to the former rather than judging it by Scripture. Its tendential

1Samuel Escobar observes that the practical consequences of this emphasis on the poor have been generally negative. Adopting Marxist analysis, liberation theologians to a great extent have concluded that non-Marxist political involvement is not adequate. This exclusivist option has systematically destroyed the possibility of other historical options in politics and caused violent repression. "The aftermath of the historical development of the 1960s and 1970s is life in a continent where social ills have multiplied, where the weak and the poor are now more defenseless in face of repression and cold pragmatism, where violence is finding easily accepted ideological coverage." "Beyond Liberation Theology: Evangelical Missiology in Latin America," InBulMissR 6 (July 1982):111.
hermeneutic puts a deliberate twist on much of the biblical concept of the poor to suit an a priori political commitment. The biblical theme of poverty, and the notion of God's bias toward "the poor," thus are drastically reduced to an unwarranted horizontalism and pressed to social conclusions. This ideological orientation, however, has unfortunately weakened and reduced the possibility of a greater impact by liberation theology. Particularly "for those to whom the Bible is not just a norm of faith but of practice, such a theology of liberation would be an unsatisfactory alternative."\(^1\)

\(^1\)Costas, Christ Outside the Gate, p. 131.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Liberation theology has been applauded by some as the most creative and penetrating theological development of the '70s. In fact, Comblin is probably correct in his affirmation that since the Age of Discovery, there has never been in Latin America anything like the revolutionary theological reflection that the continent has produced. Although some prefer to see liberation theology as a fad which is now taking its turn after the decline of the preceding fads and anticipate that it will likewise vanish, for others, liberation theology is "too demanding to become a fad." Any theology that gives voice to the aspiration of two-thirds of the world can hardly be a fad. Therefore, no matter how one reacts to the emerging theological thought of contemporary Latin America, "Europeans and North Americans must be ready to live with the fact that leadership in the future, theology or otherwise, is not going to come from Europeans or North Americans but from Asians, Africans and, Latin Americans." This

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3 "Jesus Christ the Liberator" Time, September 1, 1971, p. 34.
4 McAfee Brown, Is Faith Obsolete? (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), pp. 131-131. Justo González observes that it seems likely that the twenty-first century will be marked by a vast missionary enterprise from the South to the North (The History of Christianity, 2:397). The lands once considered the "ends of the earth will have an opportunity to witness to the descendants of those who had earlier witnessed to them" (ibid).

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conclusion seems to be further confirmed by the fact that while the North is being increasingly de-Christianized, Christianity is experiencing unexpected vitality and witnessing a "migration of the Church toward the Southern hemisphere."\(^1\)

The context for the emergence of liberation theology is the very history of Christianity in Latin America. From the period of conquest and colonization, through the wars of independence and the modernization era, the ecclesiocentric vision of its nature and mission led the Roman Catholic Church to align itself with the ruling powers in the continent. This coalition produced unfortunate effects. While serving one social segment, i.e., the rich and generally exploitative elites, from whom it received support and protection, the Church was prevented from identifying itself in any meaningful way with the oppressed. This situation, which produced a progressive alienation of the poor from the Church, was further intensified by traditional Catholic theology. Under the influences of the "pure-nature" doctrine, the Augustinian view of "original sin" and Latin America's "Christology of resignation," poverty and suffering were idealized. Excessive emphasis on otherworldly salvation and spiritual rewards for the poor became a call to passive resignation in the face of misery and oppression. Religion in Latin America, to some extent, was transformed into an alienating force and Latin American Catholicism, thus, never was able to become incarnational.

\(^1\)Bühlman, The Coming of the Third Church, p. 22. Hardly surprising, for Leonard Boff the future of the Roman Catholic Church lies in Latin America (Jesus Christ the Liberator, p. 44).
or sufficiently interested in humanizing social conditions.

While the situation within the Church remained essentially the same up to the time of the historical gathering of the Latin American bishops at Medellín in the late '60s, the socioeconomic conditions of the continent were increasingly worsening. By that time, with the failure of the developmentalist program, the real face of Latin America emerged "in all its naked roughness." The sore reality of the continent—victimized by the effects of neocolonialism, Western capitalism, and multinational corporations in combination with exploitative local groups—was dramatically marked by massive poverty, hunger, and subhuman conditions spread everywhere. Medellín, under the impact of the ecclesiological shift and anthropocentric concern of Vatican II, marks the discovery of an "option for the poor" by the progressivist camp of the Roman Catholic Church. The shocking situation of the continent, denounced as "structural violence," a state of "collective sin," and a "scandal crying to heaven," came to be perceived as a challenge to the Christian conscience.

1 Gutiérrez, "Introduction," Between Honesty and Hope, p. xvi.

2 This fundamental option was later reaffirmed by the Puebla Conference, as encapsulated in the very title of one of the central documents of the conference (Document 18, the document on which Gutiérrez worked; cf. McAfee Brown, Gustavo Gutiérrez, p. 41), "A Preferential Option for the Poor" (Puebla and Beyond, pp. 264-267).

3 The Church in the Present-day, p. 46.

4 Ibid., p. 53.

5 Ibid., p. 32.
It is on this foundation that liberation theology builds. It arises primarily out of the dramatic experience of poverty and dependence of Latin America, under the conviction of "the non-necessity of this imperfect order." It insists that the Church and Christian theology cannot ignore their share of responsibility and remain passive. There must be a commitment to liberation for all who are legally destroyed as human beings, whose poverty and misery are artificially created by injustice and exploitation. The protest against the prevailing sociopolitical conditions of the continent and the structures which caused and maintained oppression, came also to include a critique of the Church and its theology. Liberation theology radically protests against the alienating role which the institutional Roman Catholic Church and traditional theology have had in the Latin American world, often acting on the side of the status quo and legitimating the power of the oppressors.

In its innovative style, liberation theology, despite its limitations, has unquestionably made a lasting contribution to theological thought and posed to it a serious challenge. Although liberation theologians' elevation of praxis to the status of primary source for theology is unsatisfactory, by stressing the dialectical

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2 Inasmuch as it wants to be Christian, and not only "world-changing," practice must always be dependent and determined by God's revelation and fall under the critical judgment of the word of God. If, as Croatto writes, "for a Latin American theology of liberation there is no other primary source than the Latin American facts of liberation" (Liberación y libertad, p. 20), liberation theology is in
unity between theory and praxis in the act of faith they have recovered a fundamental biblical insight and reminded us that there can be no dualisms between word and deed, orthodoxy and orthopraxis, faith and obedience. Thus, while claiming the priority and normativeness of Scripture for theology, evangelicals are challenged to make similar insistence on the totality of God's teachings, which include fundamental concern for the poor and social justice.

Liberation theology has also called attention to the sterility and ethical impotence of "academic" theology, which, abstracted from reality, has often specialized in speculative niceties with little relevance to practical life. As Padilla writes, "we may disagree with the idea of regarding the historical situation as the locus theologicus, but that will not excuse us from the task of surrendering its theological content and of becoming a secular ideology for revolutionary change, merely trying to say and do what other emancipatory movements are saying and doing.

Although liberationists' stress on external activity and social involvement runs the risk of minimizing the dimensions of interiority in the life of faith (Dulles, "Faith in Relationship to Justice," p. 39), liberation theology has reminded us that faith is not merely a passive virtue. Christians are called not to "quiet piety" but to discipleship, active commitment to the service of the Kingdom of God.

Roman Catholic liberation theologians have raised their concerned voice in protest against their own Church for largely neglecting the social dimension of the gospel. Evangelical Christians can hardly in good conscience plead "innocent" to a similar charge. Coon properly describes liberation theology as arising because of the "unpaid bills of the church" ("Theologies of Liberation," p. 418). See Costas, Christ Outside the Gate, p. 131). By largely ignoring the centrality of the biblical teaching on concern for the poor and oppressed, "evangelical theology has been profoundly unorthodox" (Sider, "An Evangelical Theology of Liberation," p. 314).
of showing the intimate relation between theology and God's call in a concrete situation.\(^1\) It is not enough to affirm that theology is "good" or "sound" theology when it is biblically rooted. It must be that much, to be sure, but relevance, as the second pole of the theological ellipse, must not be compromised.\(^2\)

Furthermore, by stressing the fact that the social context in which theological reflection emerges has more influence on its elaboration than traditional epistemologies have allowed for, liberation theology has challenged the undergirding ideologies, conditioning captivities, and geographical myths of the theologies often arising from the affluent world under the uncritical pretense of "objectivity" and "plain" theology. Finally, by calling the Church to identify itself with the poor and oppressed, liberation theology has voiced a compelling biblical appeal for Christians to transcend contemporary secular success-oriented culture. Contrary to man's value-system which tends to glorify power, wealth, beauty, and wisdom, God takes the opposite course and, as supremely revealed in Jesus Christ, he identifies himself with the suffering, unworthy, and powerless.

Liberation Theology's Concept of the Poor and Its Implications for Theology

Informed by the conclusions of the sociology of knowledge and


Marxist epistemology, liberation theologians are convinced that traditional theology emerging from the affluent world has been ideologically partisan to the rich. Contrary to Marx's critique of religion, however, which never suspected that the Christian faith, the Church, and theology were not intrinsically ranged on the side of the exploiting classes, liberation theologians are determined to prove that a more faithful interpretation of Scripture and religious symbols can be a liberating force in the struggle for economic and political freedom. Under this conviction, to give theological interpretation to the commitment of the Church to the cause of the oppressed, Latin American's theologians of liberation have attempted fundamentally to rethink theology from the standpoint of the poor struggling for liberation.¹

Who are the poor in the thought of the main exponents of liberation theology? That was the crucial question of this study. Traditionally the Church has easily identified poverty as "an attitude of humility limited to inner and spiritual life."² When

¹Adopting the poor as the interlocutor or historical subject of its reflection, liberation theology introduces the poor as an integral part of the theological method. The poor are the privileged locus theologicus, the referential point of praxis, and the hermeneutical key to the meaning of history and Scripture. For liberation theologians, only in association with the poor can one legitimately carry on the work of theological reflection. See Gutiérrez, "Two Theological Perspectives," pp. 242, 247; The Power of the Poor, pp. 194; 200-201, 219; Dussel, "Domination-Liberation," pp. 51, 53, 54.

²Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit, p. 356. For Dussel, this "ideological-theological trick" abstracted from its reality was the first step toward the sacralization of the existing material order ("The Kingdom of God and the Poor," p. 120).
taken in more literal sense, poverty was considered as ordained by
nature and therefore by God, thus something unchangeable. To make the
poor believe that their condition could be changed was regarded as
deception.\(^1\) Thus, when not spiritualized and allegorized, the poor
were generally conceived within a paternalistic vision, transformed
into a mere object of generous actions, which in fact did more to
pacify the conscience of the rich than to help the poor. Emphasis was
on charity, scarcely on justice and responsibility. In this
situation, the gospel did not have much to say to the materially poor
and their condition, except to call them to resignation in the hope
of supernatural salvation.

Understandably, whereas classical theology has relied heavily
upon philosophy as the main interpretative instrument, liberation
theologians, in face of the inescapable presence of overwhelming
poverty in the Latin American context, have turned to social class
analysis. Since liberation theology is "critical reflection" on
praxis, social class analysis becomes also part of the method of
liberation theology. In the Latin American context, Marxist analysis
of society is adopted as the best tool available to prevent the
co-optation of the terms poor/oppressed and to insure that the

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\(^1\)See Rerum Novarum, arts. 14-15. Concern for the poor emerged
as a central theme at the peak moments of the Vatican Council II
(Dorr, Option for the Poor, pp. 117-156). In spite of the Council's
efforts to discard old ambiguities, however, the concept of the poor
remained imprecise (Miguez Bonino, "Ecclesia pauper, Ecclesia
pauperum," p. 141). The poor remained an object of charity, and the
"Church for the poor" was mainly a vision of the Church standing
apart from the world of the poor and offering its generous aid.

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liberation to be accomplished is liberation from poverty and oppression.

It is through the class struggle analysis, therefore, that the poor are defined. Their identity emerges not on an individual I-Thou level, but structurally, as the oppressed classes within the Marxist "dialectic of history." Although the rhetoric of liberation theologians may create some ambiguity in their frequent use of the term "poor," when consistent with their methodology, it is clear that the poor have been ideologically identified. In fact, there is a evident convergence between liberation theologians' concept of the poor and Marx's proletariat. Both are described in similar terms and are conceived as having an identical role in history.

In their concern for the poor, liberation theologians deserve credit for calling attention to a central biblical teaching and restoring to its place of honor the forgotten texts of the prophets and the gospels in defense of the poor and oppressed. However, they go on to a confusion between the poor of Scripture and those who conform to theoretical exegencies of ideological demands. In this

1Gutiérrez affirms that "when we talk about the poor, we are talking about something collective. The isolated poor person does not exist... When we talk about the poor it is also to point up the element of social conflict" ("The Irruption of the Poor," p. 111).

2Jacques Ellul, a French Protestant sociologist-theologian, sometimes regarded as "The Original 'Liberation Theologian" (Thomas Hanks, ThSFBul 7 [May-June 1984]:8-11), has called attention to the misleading and one-sided way "the poor" are used in modern thought. In his The Betrayal of the West, Ellul underlines the selective way the "poor" have been treated. Frequently, and in an unacknowledged way, the poor are those who conform to theoretical exigencies of ideological demands, not those who really suffer for justice or

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way, they tend to blur the Christian meaning of the poor and the biblical rationale for identification with them. Liberation theologians leave the impression that their "option for the poor" is, in fact, an "option for the proletariat," an option rooted in a secondary, arbitrarily selected on ideological basis. Within this perspective, the fight for the rights of the poor is transformed into a class fight, and the process of liberation tends to become an end in itself. In their ideological bent, therefore, liberation theologians may very well seriously compromise their initial authentic commitment to the poor and leave their motivations open to serious criticism. Although the definition of the poor by sociological criteria has undeniably helped to dispel the myths surrounding poverty in Latin America, if absolutized this model becomes an ideological trap. This could have been avoided

poverty. This is usually seen in the selective way the poor are denominated in a given system. Poverty is used surprisingly often as a tool and ideological weapon for achieving a certain kind of society and exclusively that. The Betrayal of the West (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), chap. 2, pp. 87-146. This point is also emphasized by D. S. Amolorpavadass, "The Poor with No Voice and No Power," in Where does the Church Stand, p. 45.

In his evaluation of liberation theology, Nikolaus Lobkowicz, for example, concludes that the movement "has nothing to do with a desire to help the poor; it has more to do with the idea that it is the task of the Christian . . . to transform the world in a material way." "Marxism and Christianity," ed., Roy Abraham Varghese, The Intellectuals Speak out about God (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1984), p. 300. Although this may be an extreme view, the correspondence between the gospel and Marxist class analysis in liberation theology is so neat that it is hard to avoid the suspicion "that the Bible is being read through the eyes of those who are already convinced Marxists" (Dulles "Faith in Relationship to Justice," p. 40).
if balanced by a view of the poor controlled by the biblical criteria.¹

In a legitimate protest against traditional spiritualization of the poor and poverty, liberation theology goes to the opposite extreme, transforming the poor into a new ideological category, again replacing a one-dimensional perspective by another.² The implications of liberation's understanding of the poor are far-reaching and radically affect its methodology and theological content. At the methodological level, it tends significantly to reduce theology from the perspective of the poor to an approach markedly sectarian, which

¹From this perspective, Ellul might have been able to help liberation theology. While admitting the influence of Marx in his "decision to side with the poor" (Perspectives on Our Age, ed. William H. Vanderburg [Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Company, 1981], p. 11), he recognized as "poor" all those so identified by biblical and sociological criteria, thus avoiding ideological captivity (see Thomas Hanks, "How Ellul Transcends Liberation Theologies," TSFBul 8 [Sept-Oct. 1984]:14). In his decision to side with the poor, Ellul writes, "I am not necessarily siding with those who have no money. I am siding with people who are alienated on all levels, including culturally and sociologically and this is variable. I will not claim that qualified French workers in the highest category are poor, even though they are subject to the capitalistic system. They have considerable advantages and not just material ones. On the other hand, I would say that very often old people, even those with sufficient resources, are poor, because in a society like ours they are utterly excluded. That is why I keep discovering those who are the new poor . . . " (Perspectives, p. 12; cf. The Betrayal of the West, pp. 85-125; Violence [London: SCM, 1981], pp. 30-35).

²Harvie Coon pointedly asks whether a one-dimensional focus on the poor as "sinners or the humble" can be corrected by another one-dimensional focus on the poor as all the "humiliated and despoiled of the earth" ("Theologies of Liberation," p. 408). We should also ask whether the paternalistic vision of poor as the mere object of charity can be properly substituted by another one-dimensional view which transforms the poor in the subject of history and the avant-garde of revolution.
speaks exclusively for a particular group which does not have the monopoly of suffering and oppression, with a parallel disregard for those forms of suffering and oppression which fall outside its sociological monistic scope. It also affects the notion of Christian praxis, which becomes the praxis of a particular group, and limited to the political sphere, conditioned by an ideology of change. This praxis hardly can be squared with the Christian comprehensive view of practice, which although may include it, is not limited to political activity. Thus, for those for whom the Bible is not just a norm of faith but also of practice, liberation theology's notion of praxis is an unsatisfactory alternative.

While attempting to avoid the traditional spiritualization and idealization of the poor, liberation theology tends to formulate a neo-idealization of the oppressed. Too easily the poor, qua poor, become the true "People of God,"¹ the genuine Christians,² the exclusive salvific and revelatory subject,³ the addressees and bearers of the gospel,⁴ the righteous,⁵ the subjects and carriers of

¹Gutiérrez, "The Poor in the Church," p. 13. See McCann's analysis of the liberationist understanding of the issue, under the heading, "Who Are the People of God?" Christian Realism, pp. 213-221. That the poor are the People of God is one of the main lessons drawn from the Exodus. See Yoder's critique, in "Exodus and Exile," pp. 297-309.

²Gutiérrez, ibid., p 15; cf. The Power of the Poor, p. 208.

³See above, pp. 271-277.

⁴Gutiérrez, "The Irruption of the Poor," pp. 120, 121.

the Kingdom,\(^1\) the force that transforms history,\(^2\) and practically the actual embodiment of God in today's world.\(^3\) This glorification of the poor, however, is a misleading conception, and in the end can only have negative effects.\(^4\) If biblical theology reveals that God is for the poor, it does not suggest that the poor constitute a morally superior class, the paragon of virtue, and morally endowed to shape history.

A one-sided materialistic vision of the ones to be liberated, and the reduction of the world's oppression to a merely social or economic dimension, presents the danger of creating what J. C. Anderson has called "doctrinal irresponsibility."\(^5\) Liberation theology's revisioning of Christian doctrine and life from the "perspective of the poor" is marked by an excessive horizontalism which makes the charge of reductionism difficult to avoid. Its view of the poor in terms of Marxist dialectics is to a great extent,

\(^1\)Ibid.

\(^2\)Gutiérrez, "The "Irruption of the Poor," p. 120; A Theology, p. 208.


\(^4\)This glorification of the poor tends to neutralize the goal of liberation. As Philippine theologian E. Nacpil has observed, "I have the impression that we have so eulogized being poor as to raise the question: What is the point of being liberated from it? Being poor has been invested with a great deal of evangelical mystique, so that it almost seems to me that the only way to become liberated is to become more poor." Ministry with the Poor: A World Consultation in Latin America (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977), p. 55; see Gort, "Gospel for the Poor?" p. 336.

responsible for the superficial way in which it articulates theological categories such as sin and ability, Christian eschatology, salvation/liberation, Christology, and ecclesiology; notions that, with rich biblical meaning, hardly could be exhausted by sociopolitical analysis.

Conceiving the poor exclusively as a sociological category and socioeconomic oppression as the main cause of alienation, liberation theologians tend to limit the notion of sin, salvation and the message of the gospel to one part of the totality of human existence, i.e. the material, somatic, and social. Though not denying the personal dimensions of sin, liberation theologians place a nearly exclusive focus on the corporate aspects of sin. Oppression is the essence of sin,¹ and the place to look for sin is in the "oppressive structures."² Carried to its logical conclusion, "the sinner is the oppressor; the non-sinner the oppressed."³ This however is misleading. It leaves the heart of the gospel untold to the poor,

¹Dussel, "The Kingdom of God," p. 125; for Miranda, sin is "interhuman injustice" (Marx and the Bible, p. 281).
²Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 175.
³Dussel, "The Kingdom of God," p. 119. Carl Braaten correctly remarks that "some of the richest pictures of sin in the Bible and the classical tradition are blurred in liberation theology. Sin provokes the wrath of God, it is slavery to Satan, it is a state of spiritual death; it is a disease of the whole person--a sickness unto death. It is a state of corruption so profound that the elimination of poverty, oppression, disease, racism, sexism, classism, capitalism, etc., does not alter the human condition of sinfulness in any fundamental way." The Flaming Center, A Theology of the Christian Mission (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 155.
and gives them false hopes. Liberation theologians rightly exposed the fact of oppression in society, and the fact that there are oppressors and oppressed, but it is questionable to give this alignment an almost ontological status. This may be true in Marxism, but the Christian understands sin and alienation from God as a dilemma confronting both the oppressors and the oppressed (Isa 1:6; Rom 3:9-19; 5:12-19; 6:23; I Cor 15:22). In fact, it is in their respective anthropologies that Marxism and biblical Christianity stand in acute tension with each other. Gilkey is right when he states that the "warped social structures are consequences, not causes of human greed, pride, insecurity and self-concern which in turn flow from the exercise of freedom, not its oppression."^1

The liberationist understanding of the poor drastically affects its notion of salvation. Salvation runs the risk of being identified with earthly socioeconomic well-being or as a mere reversal of the oppressor/oppressed relationship. The materialistic vision of the poor implies a materialistic notion of the gospel. What is offered to the poor is thus a solution that could easily be provided with or without reference to Jesus Christ. By the same token the exclusion of the oppressor becomes a fatal consequence, for why should the gospel be addressed to those who already have what it offers?^2

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1Langdon Gilkey, Reaping the Whirlwind, p. 236.

2The gospel, however, is for all, because all are lost and need to be found, sick and need to be healed. As Gort says, "the Gospel is not addressed to the materially poor, nor withheld from the
the redemptive fruits of grace from the concrete now world, liberation theology falls into a no less dangerous kind of monism.\(^1\) However, if it is true that for Marxism human life has needs and meaning solely in relation to the historical process, according to biblical teaching the meaning of human existence is not exclusively found in relation to the present but also in the ultimate destiny of the individual. In Jesus' words, "man does not live by bread alone" (Matt 4:4).

Parallel with the "sinless proletariat" view and the immanentist notion of salvation is the affirmation of the oppressed's moral capability to create justice and cooperate with God in building the kingdom. "The future of history belongs to the poor and exploited."\(^2\) "They are the force that transforms history,"\(^3\) the "subject carriers of the kingdom."\(^4\) This boundless optimism in human prosperous. The house of salvation is not incommmodious but spacious, with many rooms" ("Gospel for the Poor?" p. 342).

\(^1\) Correctly Gutiérrez has advocated a comprehensive view of salvation, to replace the traditional "piece-of-pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die" type. The opposite extreme however, is hardly satisfactory. As Costas has pointedly observed, for liberation theologians "building a just, peaceful and fraternal society is what salvation is all about" (The Church and Its Mission, p. 234; Christ Outside the Gate, p. 130). The totality of salvation is not to be confused with one or another aspect of liberation. A comprehensive approach must include a balanced concern for both the "now" and the "not yet," because to replace the futuristic view of salvation for the efforts in the field of social justice is, in fact, a poor exchange.

\(^2\) Gutiérrez, A Theology, p. 208.

\(^3\) Gutiérrez, "The Irruption of the Poor," p. 120.

nature, however, is more in tune with Marx than with biblical revelation.¹ If God is for the poor, does it confer to them superhuman attributes, as if they were the holders of the key to historical progress? This idealization of the poor retains the seeds of violence² and crusade mentality, and ultimately tends to destroy the real revolutionary capacity of the poor. The redemptive power of the poor does not lie in their moral superiority or revolutionary potential, but in the fact that through them God signals the changes required for the welcoming of his kingdom.³ The poor are redemptive in the sense that in them the whole society discovers the truth about itself. In them the human community comes to the perception of its inhumanity.

¹ At times Gutiérrez attempts to ground his vision of man's role in the revolutionary process of liberation on the calling of man to participate in the ongoing process of creation (cf. Gen 1:28; see A Theology, p. 157-160). However, he overlooks the fact that Scripture presents two differing conceptions of man. The picture of man in Gen 1 is not what appears in Gen 4, since between the two intervenes the Fall. Thus, not only one but two images are at work within man in his present condition. If on the one hand he still preserves the endowment to represent divine authority, freedom, and creativity, on the other, he is also subject to pride, self-confidence, and selfishness, which infect all, rich and poor, and stain what humans do in their participation in God's liberating activity (see Landes, p. 85).

² This observation is made in deep sympathy towards liberation theologians' concerns. Christians must recognize that the most violent people in society are often not those struggling for liberation, but rather those who dehumanize them and keep them in oppression; those who use their power to suppress change. Liberation theologians are correct in being suspicious of many calls to "nonviolence" among the oppressed while similar protest is not made against those who use "institutionalized violence," those who create and maintain oppressive and violent structures.

While one may agree with liberation theology's emphasis on the imperative of Christian presence in those efforts that aim at the ideals reflected in the Kingdom of God, Christians must avoid the pitfalls of a secularized eschatology. They must remain aware that the most and best they can do is to witness to the kingdom, working as "light" and "salt" in the world. Without collapsing into apocalyptic pessimism and passivity, we should maintain that from a biblical perspective one can hardly see man's political participation as "furthering," "building" or "realizing," the kingdom of God. The kingdom will come at God's initiative in God's own time and way. It "cannot be coerced into existence by any amount of social or political effort. It remains the gift of God and of the returning Lord to a world that cannot perfect itself by its own efforts."\(^1\) The praxis of the kingdom, as Schillebeeckx remarks, is expressed above all in metanoia.\(^2\) Furthermore, the kingdom only exists on earth where men submit themselves to God's rule, and this aim does not and cannot come within the scope of political struggle.\(^3\)

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\(^{3}\)From the New Testament, it is clear that the final triumph over evil is not brought about by any human or political means. God's intervention in human history, not human progress, is the ultimate resolution of the mystery of history. "The Christian's responsibility for defeating evil," as Yoder says, "is to resist the temptation to meet it on its own terms. To crush the evil adversary is to be vanquished by him because it means accepting his standards" (*Peace Without Eschatology*, p. 11). To expect or demand from human efforts a
Liberation theologians are justifiably critical of the Church's facile accommodation to the status quo in the Latin American society, whereby the rich were confirmed in their riches and oppressive structures and the poor consoled in their poverty, all in political, economic and social order which reflects the ethics of the kingdom is to ask for more than it can actually deliver. It can lead only to disillusionment. In their tendency to see the socialist society as an order close to the ideals of the kingdom, liberation theologians fall into the trap of judging "the capitalism of 'already' while proposing a socialism of 'not yet' without judging the existing socialism." Hugo Zorilla, "Observaciones y preguntas," quoted by Hanks, "How Ellul Transcends Liberation Theologies," p. 14). The kingdom which offers genuine rather than illusory hope for the poor is a kingdom still to come. Although a gift to be received in the present aeon, it remains in tension with the "not yet." See George E. Ladd, The Presence of the Future (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), pp. 195-217; cf. Chris Wigglesworth, "Which Way to Utopia: With Marx or Jesus," EvRTh 1 (1977):95-107.
the name of religion. But liberation theologians' Marxist-influenced view of society determines their understanding of the Church with grave implications. The Church's option for the poor tends to be expressed in terms of class struggle, and the "Church of the Poor" is transformed into the church of one social class. One wonders, however, if liberation theology is not merely repeating the Christendom mistake rephrasing it in a new form. Instead of linking God with the past regime, it links God with the next one, assuming that the error was to link God with the wrong side (the rich/oppressor), as over against questioning whether God and the Church should be linked with any regime. Past alliance of the Church and the social structures of power is replaced by a new alliance with the poor, and reliance on the ideologies of the right is replaced by reliance on the ideologies of the left.

1Significantly, while the preferential option described at Puebla is twofold: for the poor and for the young (Puebla Document, nos. 116-1205), the option for the young has been in general passed over in absolute silence in liberationist's writings. Furthermore, in light of the radical terms in which the Church's option for the poor is framed, it is difficult not to see liberation theology's "option for the poor" as not being a class option in Marxist sense, as some try to deny (see for example, Gregory Baum, "Liberation Theology and the Supernatural," Ecum 19 [1981]:83; Paulo E. Arns, "The Church of the Poor," Center Focus: News from the Center of Concern, July 1981, p. 2).

2As David Bosch observes, "A theology of the status quo and a theology of revolution are in essence exactly the same. Each accepts a specific structure as normative manifestation of God's kingdom" ("The Church and the Liberation of Peoples?" p. 18). Unquestionably the Church must take its stand on the side of the weak and powerless, but it cannot commit itself absolutely to any societal structure, whether it be the existing one or one hoped for. It cannot compromise its vision either for the oppressor or for the oppressed.
Once admitted that a particular group is the bearer of the gospel and of the meaning of history, the group's cause is absolutized and endorsed in God's name and is confused with God's own cause. The concept that one class can represent the missio Dei, in opposition to the other which being evil needs to be overthrown, is self-defeating. It ends up in merely reversing the roles of oppressor and oppressed, and ultimately reverts to an essentially pagan view of God as a tribal deity. This vision also runs the risks inherent to the early exclusivist understanding of extra ecclesiam nulla salus. Furthermore, if the Church is identified with a political party, its role as moral critic on public issues, as liberation theologians demand, is in danger of being neutralized and its own religious integrity of being endangered.

Can the Church be at home with a theology of conflict and class struggle rather than a theology of reconciliation? Liberation theologians attempt to justify their vision of the Church siding with the poor, by arguing the "gospel is for the poor." However, can the gospel be legitimately used as a divisive element of humanity along the categorical lines of the world? Does not the gospel aim precisely at the abolition of all such cleavages? In its correct protest against the historical deviation from the gospel, which has caused the Church to obscure the relationship between man's spirit and his material situation through a false pietism without roots in man's historicity, liberation theology swings from other-worldliness to

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See Gort, pp. 342-343.
politicization, from passivity to revolution, from rejection of the world to assimilation. The real revolutionary character of the Church, however, is not to be found in activism, but in faithfulness to the divine calling, as a microcosm of what life can be under God's rule. Because a more just order cannot be established with the strategies and weapons of the old age, the Church confronts the world and temporal powers with the values of the new aeon. Therefore, contrary to liberation theologians' notion, the Church needs renewal, deep conversion, rather than mere shifting of class allegiance.

Liberation theology challenges the Church by unmasking its ethical passivity in an unjust situation. It calls the Church to a genuine "conversion" to the world of the oppressed and option for the poor. This claim is unquestionably rooted in solid biblical ground. This option, however, must be cleansed from all ambiguities. An "option for the poor" faithful to the Scriptures must spring from the gospel and not from sociopolitical pragmatism, ideological motivations, or humanistic hopes for utopia. The Church must identify with the poor and oppressed because, as evident in God's eschatological act in Jesus Christ, this is the sign of the kingdom

1Liberation theologians demand from the Church effectiveness in terms of the world. However, if revolutionary effectiveness in terms of secular standards is the measure of the church's relevance, how shall we maintain a Christological focus, when Christ by the world's standards was ineffective? Hauerwas has pointedly observed that this may mean that "the most effective politics cannot be open to Christian participation exactly because the means required for effective politics are inappropriate to the kind of kingdom we serve as Christians" ("The Politics of Charity," p. 253).

(Luke 4:16-18; 7:22). Because Jesus and his gospel took the side of the poor, his Church cannot do less than that. But this option should not mean an exclusivist partisanship from the perspective of class struggle, compromising the universality of the Church's offer of salvation to all. This is why it is crucial to bring into theological reflection the biblical view of poor and poverty. In the light of what we have concluded in relation to the identity of the poor with whom Jesus was identified, the ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia means really that the Church's role is to be at the side of anyone who is in need.¹ Thus, unless liberationists go beyond what Rosemary Ruether has called liberation theologians' "apocalyptic and sectarian model of the oppressor/ oppressed,"² they risk to transform the Christian community into a political party, one more power-block among the others, trying to say and to do what other secular movements are saying and doing. Liberation theology has correctly insisted that the Church must transcend the traditional paternalistic approach to the poor and start dealing with the deep causes of poverty. This, to a great extent means that emphasis must be placed on political

¹Unquestionably in Latin America the Church must give preferential attention to the materially poor and oppressed. This preference however, must not be formulated along ideological lines. This fatally leads the Church to overlook other forms of poverty and oppression within the same context. Furthermore, the Church that takes the side of the alienated and dispossessed does not necessarily espouse any particular political or social formula for doing this. It is misleading to imply that the Church ought to take sides with the poor against the rich, thus engaging to the full in the conflict among classes.

²Ruether, Liberation Theology, p. 13.
responsibility. One wonders, however, whether it is justified to expect the Church to operate directly in the political field with the efficacy and certitude demanded by the theologians of liberation.

The Bible and the Poor

Liberation theology has rightly protested against traditional exegesis which has spiritualized the biblical theme of poverty. It has also appropriately called attention to the centrality of concern for the poor in the Bible. Liberationist "pre-understanding" of and "pre-commitment" to the poor in terms of Marxist class analysis, however, radically affects the "rereading" of the biblical text. Liberation theologians' concentration of hermeneutics on ethics and politics is marked by the strong tendency to create a "canon within the canon" and put a "political twist" on the text's meaning and intentionality. There is here, thus, a double danger: first, the danger of missing the totality of God's counsels; second, the danger of reducing the message of the accepted texts to a

1In the Bible "the protection of the innocent and the poor in society is the very warp and woof of the Israelite way of life," Botterweck, "ebhyôn," p. 31.

2Gutiérrez, for example, rarely refers to the Gospel of John or the letters of Paul. Furthermore, as Clark Pinnock has observed "In liberation theology, there is enthusiasm for revolutionary, prophetic line of thinking uncovered from the exodus or from a way of reading the Jesus story, but there is little reluctance to reject and denounce those parts of the Bible that jeopardize the conclusions liberation theology wants" (The Scripture Principle, p. 26). While they appeal to texts that refer to breaking the chains of oppression, liberation theologians are silent about turning the other cheek, going the second mile, or the frequent counsel in Scripture that there is a redemptive significance in resignation to adversity and injustice. Theologians must be reminded that even if they do find
purely socioeconomic or political level, thus finding only what is not easy to see there apart from a definite presupposition, and giving the impression that the Bible is used to justify already assumed positions.

Furthermore, the affirmation that "God is on the side of the poor," although biblical in one sense, must be purified from all ambiguities. Liberation theologians quote selectively from the biblical passages that exalt the poor and assert too sweepingly that God is always on their side. It is one thing to affirm God's central concern for the poor and for justice. Yet it is quite another to suggest that the poor are "the chosen people," the "elect," or to see God's partisanship with them in terms of class conflict, and then try to establish concern for the poor in this radical sense as the only possible alternative for Christian social commitment.

The biblical texts most often quoted by liberation theologians, however, establish precisely the contrary of that intended by their usage, and clearly indicate that liberation does not come through struggle. If the Exodus account, as a part of the whole biblical message, may serve as a paradigm of concern for justice, it can hardly be quoted as an example of overthrowing the oppressors. Similarly, when the prophets denounced injustice, they did not consider themselves the interpreters of a historical evolution. They

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passages that more directly speak to their context, they still need to check this discovery by the rest of Scripture. This is the only prevention of the temptation to find only the legitimation for formulations.
did not call for collective political action but, as the spokesmen of the Holy One of Israel, they called for conversion of the powerful and wealthy. Unquestionably from their perspective, God alone could provide true justice (Isa 1:24; Exod 3-7-9). For the prophets, the goal toward which history strains is not the abolition of classes, but the realization of God's undisputed kingship. Neither did Jesus organize the masses to overthrow unjust structures or set a program for social action.

Correctly, liberation theologians call attention to the fact that the Old Testament words for poor and poverty cannot be easily spiritualized. They generally describe a literal condition of socioeconomic poverty and deprivation, never to be considered a normal state, even less an ideal. The circle of the "poor," however, is wider and the causes of "poverty" are not limited to socioeconomic oppression, as liberation theologians insist. In tune with a holistic vision of man, the poverty/oppression language in the Psalms describes the poor and oppressed as the needy, those who are subject to a whole range of suffering and completely dependent on God. Furthermore, the poor-vocabulary expresses a spiritual dimension marked with strong religious coloration.²

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¹Jean Daniélou has observed "Nothing would be failer than to see in the prophets and psalmists champions of class warfare looking for a way to free the proletariat from exploitation by the rich." "Blessed are the Poor," CrossCur 9 (1959):383. This as André Neher has shown, would have been foreign to their outlook. Amos (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1950), pp. 136; 251-265.

²Gutiérrez recognizes this dimension (A Theology, pp. 296-299), but pays little attention to it. Furthermore he completely
In the gospel of Luke it is clear that Jesus shows preferential option for "the poor." As the messianic fulfillment of Isa 61:1-2 (cf. Luke 4:16-18; 6:20; 7:22), he brings comprehensive release to them as indicated by Luke's thematic follow-up of the scene at Nazareth indicates. But who are the poor? It is among the people gathered around Jesus that we find the best clue to their identity. Those attracted by his ministry were people from a wide range: they were the despised groups, the social and religious outcasts of Jewish society, those who had no claim upon God but his mercy (Luke 18:9-14). Luke, does not suggest that the lower social strata are the special heirs of Jesus' salvation. This would hardly be compatible with the universalist character of his gospel. The term "poor," therefore, goes beyond the designation of economic circumstances, and can hardly be understood as a term exclusively applicable to the materially deprived class.¹

¹The tax collectors, for example, although materially fortunate, were classified among the outcasts of society. This fact alone should make us cautious about making a too-easy identification of "the poor" whom Jesus's message favored with the economically dispossessed. Significantly, in Luke 7:22, Jesus concludes the list of the deeds which were to signify that the future era of salvation had arrived, affirming that the ptochoi euggelizontai. To it he attached a concluding blessing, "blessed is he who takes no offense at me." Although the beatitude is addressed to the Baptist, its implications are much broader for Luke (see Jeremias, New Testament Theology, p. 109). In the subsequent section addressed to the crowds, the primary offense of Jesus' ministry was his association with "tax collectors and sinners" (7:33-35; cf. 15:1-2). The offense which we see operative throughout Luke is that such people--to be included among "the poor" --are being offered salvation.
The picture of Jesus as the champion of the dispossessed "proletariat" is a distortion of the gospel. To string together Luke's references to the poor and press them for social conclusions is to misunderstand and misuse these texts. In continuity with the Old Testament tradition, Jesus' poor in Luke are the needy, those who, as Bornkamm remarks, "have nothing to expect from the world, but who expect everything from God. They look towards God, and also cast themselves upon God." True, one should avoid a spiritualization of the poor, but at the same time, trying to compensate for this, one should avoid moving to the opposite extreme. In Luke 14:21 those who are called to the eschatological or messianic banquet are, in fact, the most unlikely people one would have thought to invite to such a feast. There is here, however, nothing of a sectarian nature. The poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind are not the only ones invited nor do they even hold priority in the invitation (cf. Luke 14:16-20). The significance of them being invited appears to be precisely the opposite of the liberationist restrictive interpretation: it expresses the universality and all-embracing character of Jesus' offer, addressed to all. None are excluded from the kingdom, except those who decide to exclude themselves.  

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Finally, the concept of "reversal" is a motif running through the third Gospel. But the evangelist does not advocate social action to transform culture. Jesus' proclamation and partisanship to the poor is not identified with the goals of a particular liberation movement and change is not depicted as something to be brought about by the poor in revolution. Jesus goes to the poor, the despised, the sinners, the lowly, the accursed, offering them forgiveness, acceptance and deliverance, and calling them into a new community. A community whose new way of life was to embody God's will. From Luke's perspective, the ultimate transformation of social structures at large awaits the kingdom of God at the eschaton. In the meantime, the evangelist presents Jesus' Church as having a social ethic of its own life together. In Talbert's words,

In the Lukan mind the first duty of the church is to be the church, to be a community which, through the way its members deal with one another, demonstrates to the world what social relations directed by God are. So understood, Jesus and the disciples fulfill their social responsibility not by being one more power block among others but by being an example, a creative minority, a witness to God's mercy."

As much as Marxists, genuine Christians want the resolution of the problem of injustice and oppression, and of the conflict between classes. The Church, however, as the community of the new age, while awaiting for God's final intervention in history, must take a different road. It transcends human ideologies, not by imitating them, but by being itself. It is by living God's will, by true

sacrificial love, and authentic Christian witness that the church and the Christians challenge and subvert the world's values. Those who have themselves experienced God's love towards their own "poverty," weakness, and misery find in divine grace the moral identity for their compassionate service for the poor and needy. Probably this is why in the book of Acts, where Luke pictures the life of the church, the focus of attention is not the poor themselves, but those who are ministering to them (6:1ff, 9:36ff).

A Final Word

Since the first appearance of Gutiérrez' *A Theology of Liberation*, the Latin American theology of liberation has passed through a process of refinement which, to some extent, has made it more cogent and appealing. Furthermore, the work of new theologians joining the movement has significantly contributed to bringing new insights and filling lacunas. The fundamental structure of liberationist thinking, however, remains the same, and the movement still faces some basic issues and questions that need further examination.

If it is in its methodology that liberation theology shows its greatest creativity, it is also at this point that it experiences its most fundamental limitations; therefore, this is probably the crucial area in need of careful reflection. How can liberation theology retain its stated methodological approach without at the same time surrendering its theological content and becoming a secular ideology for revolutionary change? Would it be possible to retain the order liberation theology has suggested to the theological process
(priority of praxis) while giving to praxis a dominant Christian content? Should Marxist analysis still be kept as the only option to enlighten the process of liberation? What alternative mode of social analysis could be adopted?

In this connection and closely related to this study arises the question of the adequateness of the dialectical vision. Liberation theology explicitly adopts a dualist model of society, with its oppressor-oppressed dichotomy, but the features implied by this model are not spelled out clearly (such as violence, class struggle as a political strategy, etc.). To what extent can this approach be retained and still be compatible with biblical anthropology, eschatology, and vision of the oppressed and oppression? How can biblical concern for the "poor"—hardly limited to one form of oppression and alienation—be reconciled with this exclusivist view of man and society? This reflection on the concept of oppressor and oppressed evidently carries further implications for the question of the unity of the church and its responsibility to the oppressors which demand careful attention. How can the oppressed be prepared to avoid their adopting of the standards of the oppressors, in case of a successful revolution?

Probably because of the magnitude of the faced issues, liberation theology has not paid enough attention to, or has taken for granted, the transcendent dimensions of the Christian faith. It is also urgent for liberation theology to give answers to other fundamental issues such as the vertical dimensions of salvation, syncretism, and the view of a single history. Finally, liberation
Theology must make a real effort not to allow that biblical foundation to be subsumed under the pragmatic dialectic between text and hermeneutic priority of the positions assumed outside the biblical orbit. In recontextualizing the biblical text, respect must be paid to its original situation and intentionality. This is crucial because the way the second generation of liberation theologians decides to deal with Scripture and exegesis will no doubt determine the theological potential and impact of the movement in the future.

The transcendent contribution of liberation theology must be, at least, a starting point for Christian Evangelicals. In fact, although far from consensus, there are positive signs that the Evangelical community is awakening to the need for an integral gospel and seriously reassessing its position vis-à-vis society in the light of Scripture in the attempt to avoid either "verticalism" or "horizontalism." If the new order of life implicit in the Gospel has a public dimension, Christians cannot abstract themselves from

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social responsibility. Evangelicals must search for ways to actualize the Christian truth in the social and political dimension.

Probably more than anywhere else, Bible-centered Christians in Latin America must apply their sense of justice and express particular concern for the liberation for the oppressed. If the means and strategies of liberation theology cannot be subscribed, this is hardly an excuse for rejecting its ideals, or a justification for omission and passivity in a context where the lives of millions of human beings are at stake. If liberation theologians tend to blur the line between the church and the world, failure to see the connection between these two realities is the opposite mistake to be avoided. As a servant of the kingdom, the church must test political matters in the light of the gospel, and in the process it will have to touch on concrete issues. Latin American believers must transcend the traditional approach of providing charity—which generally has worked more as propaganda for the church than really served the poor—and discover new ways to minister to the powerless, disadvantaged, and oppressed in terms of social changes.

Evangelicals in Latin American must abandon the idea that in order to fulfill their mission, they need the support of the ruling powers. This notion only leads to ambiguous involvements and, ultimately, to the sacralization of the status quo. When true to its vocation, the church will always be in a critical relationship both to those in power and those who are seeking to take power. In order to be critical of that which dehumanizes and destroys people, the church, therefore, must be free. The Christian community must witness against injustice and evil, whoever are their agents. In doing so the church stands in line with the biblical and prophetic tradition (cf. Jer 20; 1 Kgs 18; 2 Kgs 1); 2 Sam 12; Mic 2; Isa 1-6; see Richard Coleman, Issues of Theological Conflict: Evangelicals and Liberals (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 233, 234.
The witness of the church and of the disciples of Jesus Christ in a world of poverty, suffering, and death may take many forms. It is beyond the scope of this study to elaborate upon them, but Latin American Evangelicals, instead of importing theological and pastoral concerns from elsewhere, must start listening to the summons of God in their own context. Furthermore, eschatological hope must not lead to apocalyptic pessimism. The church must call attention for the solution of social problems from the perspective of God's will and witness in favor of those changes which welcome God's kingdom.

Those so consumed by evangelistic zeal and preoccupations with the "souls" must keep in mind that although Jesus gave priority to man's eternal welfare, he did not neglect man's present situation. Christ's mission, as portrayed in the Gospels, reveals his concern for the whole person (cf. Matt 4:23; 9:35). Thus, even if the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the gospel are not interchangeable, they still belong indivisibly together and are integral aspects of our total calling. Therefore, orthodoxy and orthopraxis, faith and obedience, word and deed, relevance and identity, evangelism and social concern cannot properly be separated. Discipleship must be taken seriously and the church's missionary witness and work for personal conversion must not be divorced from

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1Adrio König draws a balanced relationship between faith in the return of Christ, and Christian responsibility for safeguarding the conditions necessary for life and for ensuring that God's creation is not frittered away, until Jesus comes (Here Am I, pp. 51-52.)
the Gospel's irred
cu
cible relevance for the poor and oppressed.\(^1\) The believers must keep in mind that, as Wilhem A. Visser t'Hooft puts it so well:

A Christianity which has lost its vertical dimension has lost its salt and is not only insipid in itself, but useless for the world. But a Christianity which would use the vertical preoccupation as a means to escape its responsibility for and in the common life of man is a denial of the incarnation of God's love for the world manifested in Christ.\(^2\)

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\(^1\)Jacques Ellul calls attention to the fact that the Hebrew verb 'anah--the root of the substantive 'anaw, the poor--in its most general sense means "to respond" (Money \& Power [Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984], p. 142, n. 1). Ellul then concludes: "It is thus not a chance deduction when we join the idea of responsibility to the presence of the poor. The poor person is indeed a person who requires a response" (ibid.). In fact, the very existence of the poor questions the church's faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and demands from it a response.

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