

**CONTEXTUALIZING LIBERATION THEOLOGY AS THE NEED OF THE
PRESENT SOCIETY: THE NIGERIA EXAMPLE**

Ekenedilichukwu A. Okolo

*Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State
ea.okolo@unizik.edu.ng*

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Nneamaka Philomena Ojukwu, PhD

*Department Of Religion And Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State
np.ojukwu@unizik.edu.ng*

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Abstract

The world is on go, there have always been issues of oppression, victimization, exploitation and marginalization of the poor in most societies. This was even witnessed in the time of Jesus Christ but He took a clear and definite stand on the side of the less privileged and the marginalized in society. This was seen as part of his purpose for coming to the earth which made him give it all that it demanded. In this regard, man also has this divine call and responsibility of defending the oppressed which is the essence of liberation theology. The above analogy is the thrust of this paper and it will be done using a sociological approach and theoretically framed with the Christian theory of human development. The paper, therefore, observes that the level of oppression in the present society is on the increase and the church should not claim ignorant of that. It also observes that the poverty level as it is seen in Nigeria today is manmade which has put many citizens into undue suffering and hardship, The paper concludes that the church and well-meaning Nigerians should rise for the liberation of the poor and the oppressed from the man inhumanity to man as is evident in the present society. It recommends that the ultimate assignment of man in society is to see that love leads which will give no room for oppression. It also recommends that the church cannot lose sight of the fact that oppression is almost taking the centre stage in recent days in Nigeria and should rise to the liberation of man and reclaim his humanity.

Keywords: Contextualizing, Liberation, Theology. Need, Present, Society, Nigeria, Example

Introduction

Liberation theology is considered one of the most significant contributions of the Latin American Church to Christianity. Its care and attention to the poor have undoubtedly moved many Christians to take a more systematic and honest approach to dealing with the problems of the poor and the oppressed. The movement is rooted in the Christian faith and Scriptures according to Hillar (1993) seeks its ideological superstructure based on religious reflection in close association with the Church organization. It is typically not only for Latin America but for the entire third world and any social situation of oppression. Members of the religious orders were committed to the vow of poverty and did not own property individually; nevertheless, they enjoyed a standard of living and security that separated them from the daily agony of the poor. The question then arose for some of them, what is the ideal of poverty in a situation where most are suffering dehumanizing poverty and what should the Church and Christians do about it?

Liberation theology thus emerged as a result of a systematic, disciplined reflection on the Christian faith and its implications. The theologians who formulated liberation theology usually do not teach in universities and seminaries, they are small groups of Catholic or Protestant clergy and have direct contact with the grass-roots groups as advisors to priests, sisters or pastors. Since they spend at least some time working directly with the poor themselves, the questions they deal with arise out of their direct contact with the poor (Hillar, 1993:35). It is imperative to note that liberation theologians interpret the Bible and the key Christian doctrines through the experiences of the poor. It also helps the poor to interpret their faith in a new way. It deals with Jesus' life and message. The poor learn to read the Scripture in a way that affirms their dignity and self-worth and their right to struggle together for a more decent life. The poverty of people is largely a product of the way society is organized therefore liberation theology is a critique of economic structures.

Theoretical Framework

This work is theoretically framed with the Christian theory of human development. The theory according to Thomas (1990:79) posits two cardinal goals to human endeavour, which are Christian's pursuit of everlasting life in heaven and the practice of doing well in individuals' live by helping the poor, the needy, and the depressed and contributing to societal development. These cardinal goals of human development are hung on two principal of charity and justice which are seen in social services to societies. This theory assumes a purpose which is specifically aimed at human liberation from such conditions as poverty, famine, ignorance, lack of medication, etc. Hence liberation theology holds that Jesus' incarnation makes it imperative for Christians to accept his existence as a

reality which places on them the obligation to work for society (Okwueze, 2005:47). There are no rooms for a flight from the world only to hope for eternal happiness in heaven because Christians do not lead a schizophrenic life with total focus in heaven. Having performed their duty on earth, happiness comes when it will; tomorrow will be death and resurrection in Christ but for the time being, Christians must be fully involved in the changing of society. This theory is suitable for this work because it challenges Christians and every well-meaning Nigerian to rise to the expectation of God and the poor from them. It also sounds like a clarion call to Christians that they have roles to play in changing the already soiled image of society.

Liberation Theology: An Intrinsic Understanding

Liberation theology is a synthesis of Christian theology and socio-economic analyses, often based on far-left politics, particularly Marxism, that emphasizes social concern for the poor and political liberation for oppressed peoples (Cook, 1998:203). In the 1950s and the 1960s, liberation theology was the political praxis of Latin American theologians, such as Gustavo Gutiérrez of Peru, Leonardo Boff of Brazil, Juan Luis Segundo of Uruguay and Jon Sobrino of Spain, who popularized the phrase "preferential option for the poor". In the words of Kira (2014), liberation theology is a social and political movement within the church that attempts to interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ through the lived experiences of oppressed people. While that does not necessarily seem to be a cause of contention in the church, it has in the 60s been practised, thought and caused a tremendous amount of controversy. Liberation theology is a method of defining Christian faith in the political context of underdevelopment, in a partisan spirit committed to action.

According to Pope John Paul VI, in his Encyclical promulgated on March 26, 1967, Liberation theology could be interpreted as an attempt to return to the gospel of the early church where Christianity is politically and culturally decentralized. It proposes to fight poverty by addressing its alleged sources and the sin of greed. In so doing, it explores the relationship between Christian theology and political activism, especially concerning economic justice, poverty and human rights. The principal methodological innovation is seeing theology from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed. It provides an answer to the everlasting issue of the relationship between the Church and the government, calling on the Church very clearly to stand with the poor and to become politically engaged against social structures and relationships which cause poverty and suffering. What is new about liberation theology is the demand for creating new forms of social co-existence (Vesely, 1986:18). It is not enough to feed the poor, we need to become involved in changing the unjust, sinful system which causes oppression and poverty, and in establishing new righteous social relations which would be based on the

principles of the Kingdom of Heaven and which would in itself solve the very root of poverty and suffering. It is a call for the Church to become involved in establishing the Kingdom of God right here in the world.

Liberation theology in the opinion of Hillar (1993:38) has two basic principles: first, it recognizes a need for liberation from any kind of oppression - political, economic, social, sexual, racial and religious. Secondly, it asserts that theology must grow out of the basic Christian communities and should not be imposed from above, that is, from the infallible sourcebook or the magisterium of an infallible Church. It explores the theological meaning of human activities: It interprets the Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle and hope of the poor. It critiques society and ideologies sustaining it, pretends not to lay down specific rules for how to struggle for justice, but stresses that a responsible commitment to class conflict is an expression of love for one's neighbour. Through solidarity with the poor, theologians of liberation advocate the transcendence from class division to a new type of society, it critiques the activity of the Church from the angle of the poor.

The main theme of liberation is considered at three levels of meaning which are interconnected. At the social and political level, liberation is an expression of the aspirations of the oppressed classes and people. This liberation emphasizes the conflict in the economical, social and political process between the oppressed and the oppressors. At the human level, liberation is conceived as a historical process in which people develop consciously their destiny through social changes. At the religious and salvific level, liberation means liberation from sin, the ultimate source of all deviation from the fraternity of all injustice and oppression. It brings man back into communion with God and fellow men which is radical total liberation. These three processes cannot be separated; they form a unique, complex process. Furthermore, Okwoeze (2005:19) maintains that liberation theology holds that the incarnation of Jesus Christ makes it imperative for every Christian to accept his existence in this world as a reality which places on him the obligation to work for the transformation of the world. He goes on to maintain that it is the task of theology to point the way to the full humanization of persons and social structures so that they will reflect the truth, justice and love proclaimed by Jesus in the sermon on the mount. In other words, the Christian message has to be placed in and evaluated based on its practical application to the ethical-social, political and economic agenda left by Jesus Christ himself.

Emergence and Basic Assumptions of Liberation Theology

Gustavo Gutierrez, a Roman Catholic priest is considered to be one of the fathers of liberation theology (Britannica, 2014). However, neither he nor the other founders can be considered to be the people who invented this theology. Liberation theology has, for the most part, emerged among priests and pastors who have been in direct touch with the people, who have recognized the hardships of the people in the society and tried to formulate theological answers and practices. Many have written various articles and spread ideas about the need for the Church to stand with the poor and not just through the usual humanitarian work, but in a way which would resolve the root causes of poverty. The date that is generally accepted as the birth of liberation theology is the Second Latin American Episcopal Conference held in 1968 in Medellin, Colombia when the attending Bishops published a press release in which they affirmed the rights of the poor. In 1971, Gustavo Gutierrez published his influential book, “The Liberation Theology”, which is considered to be the essential text of liberation theology. In his work, Gutierrez first described and then systematized the existing aspirations and practices; involvement on behalf of the poor in their class struggle and establishment of social justice. By referring to Bible verses and the conclusions reached in Church councils, he established a theological basis for this practice, which was already beginning to develop among the Latin American Clergy. Thus, we can say that liberation theology was not born in the heads of theologians but emerged from the practices of the people and the Clergy who have contextualized their faith following the circumstances in Latin American society. Theologians have only provided a systematic framework, understanding and formulation of liberation theology.

A notable liberation theologian, though he did not use the term was Martin Luther King Jr. an African American civil rights leader. He promised to fight for equal rights for all regardless of colour or creed. As Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968, he was never able to officially align himself with the aims of liberation theology. However, modern liberation theologians look to their predecessors as spiritual predecessors of the movement. In this case, Martin Luther King Jr. certainly supported a similar struggle for civil rights and promoted similar techniques such as passive resistance to violence, awareness-raising events, and grassroots-level organizations. Liberation theology is built on several basic assumptions. The first assumption is that God is interested in man as a whole. Therefore, the freedom which is brought by the Gospel of Jesus Christ implies freedom in every segment of human existence, because God wants us to be free from all types of slavery (Gutierrez, 1989). Not only did sin cause internal corruption, but sinful and enslaving social relationships as well. Since God wants to deliver man from his internal sin through Jesus Christ, He also wants to deliver him from social corruption, i.e.,

the consequences of sin in interpersonal and broader social relationships. Christ brings salvation on all levels and God's saving work encompasses the totality of human existence (Gutierrez, 1989: 164).

Thus, the Gospel does not only bring internal freedom from sin, but political and economic freedom as well. The central feature of liberation theology is the so-called God's preference for the poor. The entire Bible, beginning with the story of Cain and Abel, mirrors God's special love for the weak and the abused during human history. The poor are thus the privileged members of the Kingdom. In line with this, Gutierrez concludes that outreach efforts need to be primarily aimed at the oppressed and the poor. He proposed that Christians need to take the side of the poor and against social relations which enslave, and this is a necessity and not an option because only then can the breadth of Good News and of the freedom that Jesus Christ brought be truly understood. More so, Gutierrez writes that being a part of the people and sharing in their sufferings, joys, worries and struggles is not an academic issue, but a prerequisite to being a Christian (Gutierrez 1989, 38). Hence, Jeremiah 22:16 says that, knowing God means defending the right of the poor and the miserable and attaining justice (Gutierrez 1989, 211).

Forms of Liberation Theology

Liberation theology is seen in three different forms which will be discussed at this point. They are Latin American liberation theology, African American/Black liberation theology and Feminist/Womanist liberation theology.

a. Latin American liberation theology: Liberation theology was the name given to a species of theology that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Latin America. It called for a radical reassessment of theology, pastoral works and the Catholic Church itself. The Church and its Clergy had historically coexisted with morally authorized slavery, conquest, colonialism and neocolonialism. By the late 1960s, this was no longer politically, let alone ethically tolerable. Anti-colonial wars and national liberation struggles had erupted throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America as the 'Third World' came to signify an anti-imperialist project to build a world predicated on equity, solidarity and sovereignty. Amid these revolutionary times was convened the Second Vatican Council, colloquially known as Vatican II (1962-65), out of which came a call for a more 'worldly' Catholic Church (Bradley, 2016).

In the words of Paulo (2000), Latin American liberation theology maintains that a Church roused by liberation theology would be a Church that prophetically denounces injustices and evangelizes to raise consciousness. The popular and impoverished classes would learn that their misery is structurally induced and repressively enforced; that such misery is an

offence to God in whose likeness and image all are made; and that they can collectively build a world governed by hope and love. Clergy were accordingly called to be poor in spirit, this meant not merely renouncing worldly goods and surrendering one's self to God, but living in solidarity with the poor and speaking out against poverty. So too was the Church expected to rethink its structures whether this meant selling off its property, decentralising its authority, or ordaining women as priests.

b. Black liberation theology: This refers to a theological perspective which originated among African-American seminarians and scholars, and in some black Churches in the United States and later in other parts of the world. It contextualizes Christianity in an attempt to help those of African descent overcome oppression. It especially focuses on the injustices committed against African Americans and black South Africans during American segregation and apartheid, respectively. According to Burrow (1994), Black theology seeks to liberate non-white people from multiple forms of political, social, economic, and religious subjugation and views Christian theology as a theology of liberation, a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the Gospel, which is Jesus Christ. Black theology mixes Christianity with questions of civil rights, particularly raised by the Black Power movement and the Black Consciousness Movement. Further, black theology has led the way and contributed to the discussion and conclusion that all theology is contextual even what is known as systematic theology.

c. Feminist liberation theology: This is a movement found in several religions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and New Thought, to reconsider the traditions, practices, scriptures and theologies of those religions from a feminist perspective. Some of the goals of feminist theology include increasing the role of women among the Clergy and religious authorities, reinterpreting male-dominated imagery and language about God, determining women's place concerning career and motherhood and studying images of women in the religion's sacred texts and matriarchal religion (Porterfield, 1987:236). Feminist liberation theology is seen in all religious traditions but for the sake of emphasis; let us briefly look at Christianity. Harrison (2007) sees Christian feminism as an aspect of feminist theology which seeks to advance and understand the equality of men and women morally, socially, spiritually, and in leadership from a Christian perspective. This is through reformation to be along the lines of feminist thought concerning their religion. Christian feminists argue that contributions by women in that direction are necessary for a complete understanding of Christianity.

These theologians believe that God does not discriminate based on biologically determined characteristics, such as sex and race. Their major issues include the ordination

of women, male dominance in Christian marriage, recognition of equal spiritual and moral abilities, reproductive rights, and the search for a feminine or gender-transcendent divine (Polinska, 2004). Christian feminists often draw on the teachings of more historical texts that reinforce that feminism does not go against Christianity but has always been in its texts. The term Christian egalitarianism is sometimes preferred by those advocating for gender equality and equity among Christians who do not wish to associate themselves with the feminist movement. Women apologists have become more visible in Christian academia, their defence of the faith is differentiated by a more personal, cultural and listening approach driven by love (Dilley, 2015:3).

The Influence of Marxism on Liberation Theology

In his Liberation Theology, Gutierrez leaves no doubts as to what is this social relationship that the Church should fight alongside the poor. Those include capitalism and the United States of America, as well as their allies in the form of the ruling national groups. Therefore, he writes that there can be no authentic development of Latin America until it is delivered from them i.e., he is identifying capitalism with the condition of robbery, oppression, and alienation (Gutierrez 1989, 141). The influence of Marxism on liberation theology is very clear. The 1960s were a time when Marxism was spreading through the Cuban revolution and was becoming popular across Latin America through its noble goals it was gaining the sympathies of the people who felt repressed, as well as the clergy who were serving these people.

In the words of Vogel (2018), he posits that just like Marxism, under its influence liberation theology also divides people into two classes: the oppressors and the oppressed. The oppressors are those who possess the means and the capital for work, while the workers are oppressed. Gutierrez explains how Latin American society has been structured in such a way to benefit the few who are appropriating the fruits of other people's labour and that it is necessary to "transform this society, which has been built on private property over the means of production" (Gutierrez, 1989: 223). So, just like in Marxism, private property is something that needs to be changed because the relationship between the owner of the means of production and the worker cannot possibly be righteous, as it inherently represented appropriation, robbery, and injustice. It is clear that liberation theology is using the Marxist interpretation of society, history and justice itself and is providing it with a Christian expression.

Marx himself claimed that "the philosophers only interpret the world, but the world needs changing instead" (Gutierrez, 1989: 236), Gutierrez also criticizes the Church, which is only providing theological explanations of the world, and he calls on it to become actively involved in changing the world. Liberation theology provides a Christian appearance to

the fight against oppressors and proclaims it to be a Christian duty. A Christian must take the side of the poor through his social and political involvements in the struggle against injustice, i.e., against elements in society and those social relationships which have been perceived as being oppressive, so the influence of Marxism is clear. The same analysis and the division of society are used, the same vocabulary is used and capitalism is also juxtaposed as the main enemy of righteous relationships.

The Church and Liberation Theology

Okwoeze (2005:15) sees liberation theology anywhere in the world and under whatever manner or shape it operates as the product of the awareness that oppression and exploitation of the less privileged are manmade, sinful and therefore contradicts everything that the gospel message stands for. He notes that liberation theology has made its impact felt in many parts of the world, especially in places where different forms of operation have existed side by side with the adherence to the Christian faith. As such, liberation theologians everywhere are saying that the conditions to which the less privileged people are subjected socially, economically and politically by the rich is a scandal to the Christian faith and commitment and should be addressed. Okwoeze goes on to observe that anything which claims to be Good news for all but fails to confront these ugly conditions faced by the poor cannot be taken seriously by the oppressed in society. This is to say that until the Good news takes a concrete form and fights against all forms of impoverishment and exploitation as going against God's will, the reign of God which is the reign of justice will never come. And as long as the reign of God is deferred, the poor who are always the helpless victims of injustice will continue to question the authenticity and relevance of the Good news and the Church.

The Church and the theologians in a society that is full of oppression cannot afford to overlook the problem of oppression since Jesus who is the role model is a liberating God who is always interested in the liberation of His people. Okwoeze maintains that Jesus' option and struggle for the betterment of the poor is because He was born poor, He lived poor and He died poor. Amid oppression and dehumanization of the members of the society whom the Church is also supposed to stand for, the Church is always confronted with two costly options. The less option is for the Church to keep quiet and live but the problem is that if it keeps quiet to live, the people who fill up the pews every Sunday would begin to see it as having aligned itself with the rich and the powerful oppressors and they will now leave the Church and that will be the real and actual death of the Church. On the other hand, if the Church dares to take the more costly option by speaking out in favour of those who are exploited, she may be persecuted for a while but she will stand sure because the people for which it is persecuted will still fill its pews and stand

with her at all times (Okwoeze, 2005:17). The issue of oppression and exploitation of the poor and less privilege in the society is not new. They have existed before and were there in the time of Jesus, hence Jesus took a clear stand on the side of the less privileged and those who were marginalized by society. Liberation theology insists that to be true to Christ, the Church must opt for the poor.

Furthermore, liberation theology holds that the incarnation of Jesus Christ makes it imperative for every Christian to accept his existence in this world as a reality which places on him the obligation to work for the transformation of the world; hence, there is no room for a flight from the world only to hope for eternal happiness in heaven. Christians should be fully committed to the transformation of the world (Okwoeze, 2005:19). More so, the truth is that resistance against tyranny is a religious obligation while those who treat others unjustly invite violent reactions, anarchy and lawlessness. As Walter puts it, both history and humanity remain the same. Like America of his time, our people here in Nigeria are hungry for bread amid plenty even as they struggle in sweat to wrest from greedy and hostile men just enough to keep them and their children alive. Despite the Machiavellian and vicious propaganda embarked upon, the welfare of the masses of this country has always remained at odds with the selfish forces of the rich and the powerful who parade themselves as our leaders (Okwoeze, 2005:14).

Conclusion

We have seen that liberation theology emerged from the need for the Church to define its response and practices when faced with the specific challenges of Latin American society. It is an attempt to engage the Church into becoming involved with the life of society. The paper has made us see that the basic assumption in liberation theology is the belief that God cares about man as a whole, and that He brings deliverance to everything that makes humans what they are. According to liberation theology, being a Christian means acting together with God in bringing freedom on all levels, including the social and political levels. We have seen that liberation theology is influenced by Marxist philosophy, i.e., the Marxist analysis of society, history, and Scripture itself. It is important to note at this time that poverty, corruption and unjust social relations are indeed huge problems, and liberation theology has been doing a good thing by calling on the Church to become actively involved in society instead of being just a passive observer that pretends to be blind to the problems in society. It presents a justified criticism of the Church which is absorbed with itself and which has through becoming dependent on privileges, become tied to the government and inefficient in regards to its mission. By starting a strong dialogue about the role of the Church in society and about how it can be the salt and light

of the world in this world full of evil. Liberation theology is surely contributing greatly to making the Church leave its four walls to the society where its impacts are needed.

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