

Religion and Politics in Gustavo Gutiérrez

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*Liberation theology seeks to be a way of speaking about God. It is an attempt to make the word of life present in a world of oppression, of injustice, of death.*²

*The adoption of a spiritual perspective is followed by a reflection on faith (therefore, a theology) as lived in that perspective.*³

For the past forty years Gustavo Gutiérrez has been at the centre of discussions related to the place and mode of engagement between the Church and the world.⁴

Born in Peru, he trained for the priesthood in Europe and was raised within the

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² Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Speaking about God”, *Concilium* 171 (1984/1): 31 [Claude Geffré, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Virgil Elizondo, *Different theologies, common responsibility: Babel or Pentecost?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984)].

³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (20th Anniversary Edition, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2003), 35.

⁴ For historical data on his life see Sergio Torres, “Gustavo Gutiérrez: A historical sketch”, in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, Eds. *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), 95-101.

intellectual tradition of the French *novelle theologie*. Gutiérrez's seminal work *Teología de la liberación* became one of the most read and discussed theological works of the 20th Century.⁵ Within that particular context of the Latin America of the 1960s and an ongoing cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union, Gutiérrez made an epistemological statement that was to bring together several ecclesial and theological developments within the Catholic Church triggered by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).⁶ For Gutiérrez theology is a second act and a narrative that uses language in order to understand God's presence in the world. Thus, for Gutiérrez: 'Theology is a language. It attempts to speak a word about the mysterious reality that believers call God. It is a *logos* about *theos*'.⁷

⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación: Perspectivas* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 16th edition 1999 [Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones 1971]).

⁶ For a collection of the major documents see Austin Flannery O.P., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport, N.Y.: Costello and Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1992 revised edition), for the history of the Council see Giuseppe Alberigo, Ed., *History of Vatican II*, vol. I *Announcing and Preparing Vatican Council II: Toward a new Era in Catholicism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis and Leuven: Peeters, 1995), vol. II *The Formation of the Council's Identity: First Period and Intercession October 1962 – September 1963* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis and Leuven: Peeters, 1997), vol. III *The Mature Council: Second Period and Intercession September 1963 – September 1964* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis and Leuven: Peeters, 2000).

⁷ Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Theological Language: Fullness of Silence", in Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Density of the Present: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999), 186; from "Address on the occasion of his induction to the Peruvian Academy of Spanish Language 1995", full original in *Páginas 137* (1996): 66-87.

Theology is not a first act for a theologian; the first act is clearly faith, expressed in prayer and commitment within the Christian community.⁸ However, that clear statement had been the product of many years of theological disputes, doctrinal misunderstandings, interpretative projects, engagement with Marxists and neo-liberals, and all within a changing Latin American Church that became fully engaged with the world of politics, economics, and development.⁹ In other words, for Gutiérrez theology is a textual narrative that arises out of a practice within a particular context of a Christian community engaged with the world, and particularly within the world of the poor and the disadvantaged of society.

This paper explores ideas of religion and politics within the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez. In its first part it outlines greater ecclesial and social influences within his early theological period; in its second part it focuses on the centrality of human history in his theological framework of his second theological period; and, in its third part it examines some of Gutiérrez' post 1992 writings in relation to the religion and the politics in a wider social context.¹⁰ The

⁸ Gustavo Gutiérrez, 'Mirar lejos: Introducción a la decimocuarta edición', in *Teología de la liberación: Perspectivas* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 16th edition 1999 [Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones 1971]), 38.

⁹ Theology as a poetic narrative on God's presence and action in the world presupposes a changing paradigm, thus it is no longer possible to write about Gutiérrez' theological work by just focusing on his major initial work *Teología de la liberación*.

¹⁰ The theological periods within the original Spanish texts are clearly chronological and they follow theological reflections that arise out of preparation for the meeting of Latin American Bishops at Medellín, Puebla, and Santo Domingo. These periods are more difficult to isolate within the published works in English due to the fact that Gutiérrez has not published everything he has ever written and that not everything published in other languages had been translated into

paper's conclusions argue that Gutiérrez' treatment of religion and politics presupposes God's presence in human history through a Church engaged with the world, in which it is necessary to participate actively in the political in order to act religiously. Religion as the ritual and social practices of a rule of life (*religio*) produces theology as a narrative. That narrative as a text allows practitioners (and others) to follow historical interpretations of the rule of life and those interpretations also affect the way in which practitioners understand practices within that way of life. This paper concludes that according to Gutiérrez religion and politics are embodied in religious ritual and secular governance respectively through a constant dialectic of interaction, contradiction, and solidarity.

Theology as Commentary

Gutiérrez' major work arose out of his religious commentary on political events. The Latin America of the 1960s as the one of today had a majority of people living in economic depravation and the European educated Peruvian priest challenged the sole possibility of a God that wanted a established order that was socially unjust. Gutiérrez, the student of theology, was influenced by a new theological trend present in France in the 1950s and 1960s arising out of French

the English language. Frei Betto has suggested that, "It is quite likely that he is the author of more unpublished texts, known only to a small circle of readers, than of published works. Usually he does not even sign the mimeographed texts, which include an excellent introduction to the ideas of Marx and Engels and their relationship to Chrsitianity", Frei Betto, "Gustavo Gutiérrez – A friendly profile", in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, Eds. *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), 31-37, 35.

democratic ideas and by the sociological theories that had challenged the functional and non-changeable world portrayed by Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss.¹¹

A post-war European world was rebuilding itself on new paradigms that arose out of suffering and the annihilation of the Jews, in which Marxism and a Marxist critique of society was playing an ever-increasing role, particularly in France. Gutiérrez' favourite European theologian of that time was M.-D. Chenu, who had asked questions about the given scientific nature of theology as a science rather than as an interpretive project, and from whom Gutiérrez was to learn the centrality of spirituality within the construction of any theological edifice.¹² It is at that moment that the roots of three kinds of Catholic theology became collateral as scholars posed questions about religion as a ritual practice and the following of Christ as a rule of social life. Those three types of theology were: neo-scholastic theology, a transcendental-idealist theology, and a post-idealist theology.¹³

Neo-scholastic theology based itself on a religion associated with a ritualistic piety, its acolytes returned to the sources of scholastic philosophy of

¹¹ See for example, Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 1990), and, Wendy James and N.J. Allen, Eds. *Marcel Mauss: A Centenary Tribute* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 1998).

¹² M.-D. Chenu, *La théologie est-elle une science?* (Paris, 1957) and *Le Saulchior: Una scuola di teologia* (Casale Monferrato: Marietti, 1982 [French original, 1937]).

¹³ This theological schema is posed by Johann Baptist Metz, "Theology in the struggle for history and society", in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, Eds. *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), 165-166.

the Middle Ages and they produced a narrative theology based on “a theology of antiquity”.¹⁴ As a result, neo-scholasticism was unable to deal with social change, secularism, atheism, and with suffering. Religion and politics were separated as far as religion and political governance were separated, with the hope that they could become one in order to return to a past union between God, the Church, and the governance of society. Neo-scholasticism remained a European phenomenon as far as religious practice remained sectarian and did not engage with other faiths or indeed with atheists and with the possibility of the freedom of conscience proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council. Gutiérrez did not partake of this paradigm and did not include it as a possibility in his dealings with religion and politics.

Transcendental-idealist theology based itself on a religion associated with the sources of the Church Fathers and with scholasticism, however its acolytes engaged themselves with the challenges of modernity in Europe through the production of a theological narrative of community. They tried to forcefully but positively engage themselves with the use of subjectivity rather than classical metaphysics, the critical encounter with Kantian narratives of the self, German idealism, existentialism, secularisation, and the narratives of truth and method of scientific discourses. Gutiérrez studied those challenges and addressed them in

¹⁴ Nicholas Lasch compared the unification of cultural theology with classicism, where one enters that particular time and discourse as the only one through the study of Latin and Greek authors, “Theologies at the service of a common tradition”, *Concilium* 171 (1984/1): 75 [Claude Geffré, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Virgil Elizondo, *Different theologies, common responsibility: Babel or Pentecost?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984)].

his studies but decided later to leave them and search for paradigms of religion and politics that used other social contexts.¹⁵

Post idealist theology based itself on a practice of religion that addressed three new challenges to theology as a narrative: (i) the end of theological innocence *vis-à-vis* secularisation and the ideological and social challenges to a practice of religion devolved from social and political life¹⁶; (ii) the end of theological systems that did not include the individual self and the person, triggered by the post-holocaust theological narratives of the survivors, the “irruption” of the Auschwitz catastrophe,¹⁷ and the “irruption of the poor” rather than the development of theologies about poverty; and, (iii) the end of a practice of religion based on cultural mono-centrism and superseded by a social governance related to an ethnically and culturally polycentric world in which

¹⁵ Gutiérrez provides an evaluation of modern Protestant Theology, for example, in an essay in which he examines Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s criticism of Karl Barth, “The limitations of modern theology: On a letter of Dietrich Bonhoeffer”, in *The Power of the Poor in History* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 222-234.

¹⁶ This situation affected not only Catholic theology but also theologies influenced by the Reformation, “since the Reformation took place within the framework of an all-embracing Christian understanding of the world”, see Johann-Baptist Metz, “Theology in the Modern Age, and before its end”, *Concilium* 171 (1984/1): 14 [Claude Geffré, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Virgil Elizondo, *Different theologies, common responsibility: Babel or Pentecost?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984)].

¹⁷ For an excellent overview see Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The Holocaust: Theological and Ethical Reflections”, in Gregory Baum, Ed. *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999), 76-90.

ethnic and cultural characteristics can no longer be part of an ideological superstructure based either on Marxist or neo-liberal terms.

It is in that response to religious practice in the contemporary world of the 1960s and within that framework of a *post idealist theology* that Metz and Gutiérrez articulate a theological narrative that describes and challenges the possibility of theologising outside the social structures of political governance and indeed of people's lives.¹⁸ Metz' context is European and he develops a strong political theology while Gutiérrez' context is Latin American (and the third world) and he develops a theological framework known as liberation theology.¹⁹ For both theologians religion and politics are not separate entities because they come out of actions carried out by Christians who involve themselves with those in need within society, involvement that arises from their

¹⁸ Gutiérrez has been criticised for having been influenced by modernity and its romantic idealism, however it is clear that the thought of Gutiérrez was in the 1960s and 1970s influenced by the Latin American context in which the Pauline vision of the "new man" was also used by socialist discourses associated with the Cuban revolution and with a socialist conception of revolution led by the icon of Che Guevara, see Mariano Delgado, "'Esperanza plañe entre algodones': Cuando Gustavo Gutiérrez habla de dios", *Teología de la liberación: Cruce de miradas* (Coloquio de Friburgo, April 1999, Lima: Instituto Bartolomé de Las Casas-Rimac and Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 2000), 101-132, 102-103, cf. Michael Sievernich, "Von der Utopie zur Ethik. Zur Theologie von Gustavo Gutiérrez", *Theologie und Philosophie* 71 (1996): 33-46.

¹⁹ Gutiérrez gave the name to an ecclesial reflection that had already taken place, thus "liberation theology is not a new growth of Christian theological reflection, but rather an outgrowth of long years of such reflection", William Boteler MM, "Greetings", in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, Eds. *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), 13-15, 13.

religious selfhood and their Christian life in community. The place of the Church in history is not as establishment but as people, and the place of theology is of narrative rather than doctrine.

The influence of those ideas were enormous in Catholic theological circles not because those were new ideas, it must be remembered that the social doctrine of the Church was already articulated since 1891, but because they were the first theological fruits of the Second Vatican Council. The “post-idealist” narrative of God’s work in the world had returned to the biblical and doctrinal sources that had been confused by European philosophical epistemologies within European theology. The work of Metz in Europe and of Gutiérrez in Latin America became catalysts for pastoral models centred on the concept of the “people of God” rather than on the Church as the only place where God could or should intervene within the contemporary world.

Gutiérrez’ talk to a group of priests in Chimbote, Perú, in 1968 and the subsequent publication of his seminal work did not end theological discussions on pastoral matters related to the implementation of Vatican II but activated a clear theological exploration of the place of religious practitioners within society.²⁰ The European context of secularism and atheism was changed into a

²⁰ It is clear that “the influence of Gustavo [Gutiérrez] on theological method and praxis began in Peru long before the concretisation of that influence took place in books and at high-level church conferences. Taking time to work with groups of persons – delegates of the word, pastoral agents, local religious, students groups, missionaries- became the modus operandi of these young Peruvian priests’, Luise Ahrens, M.M. and Barbara Hendricks, M.M. in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, Eds. *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), 3-4.

theological narrative that explored the religious practices and beliefs of Christians within a heavily religious environment that questioned the political governance offered within their own societies. Theological works spoke of the “irruption of the poor”, of oppressors and oppressed, of liberation from personal sin as well as from sinful structures of governance.

The impact of Gutiérrez’ work was enormous because he relocated a majestic God from a triumphant Church into an anthropomorphic and incarnate deity closer to the Hebrew Scriptures than to Greek thought and platonic ideals. The rediscovery of the Scriptures as authority within the Catholic Church at Vatican II helped to question the possible dichotomies of the neo-scholastics by returning to the Old Testament where relations within society were part of a social practice in which there was no clear separation between religion and politics. North American and European theologians took the challenge of Gutiérrez and organised conferences and seminars in order to examine their own theological presuppositions and the diversified contexts in which those theological statements were being made. The students of the University of Chicago, for example, organised a conference in 1979 where the new Shailer Matthews Professor of Divinity, Langdon Gilkey, addressed their concerns with the following statement:

Surely there can be no doubt that the important later symbols of the New Covenant people, the messianic reign, and even the Kingdom itself repeat and develop, rather than abrogate, this union of the social and the religious, the historical and the ideal, which begins here in the original calling and establishment of the people of God. This interrelation and

interdependence of the religious and the social, the individual and the communal –and the providential constitution of both- was re-expressed in classical, Hellenistic form in Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei*, and variously –and often unfortunately- in the subsequent concepts of Holy Christendom and in the Calvinistic views of the Holy Community.²¹

Within Latin America, Africa, and Asia theologians explored their commitment, their religious practices, and the political world in which they lived in. In North America the oppressed of the past and of the present asked questions about their role in society (their religion), their God’s involvement in the world (their theology), and their politicians governance of society (their politics).

However, while most theologians, academics and politicians have explored some of Gutiérrez’ ideas related to his first period of work, he continued his practice of religion and his ministry as a priest in a slum of Lima, where the politics of Peruvian society required him to reflect on his practice through other two research periods: one on the place of history in God’s plan of salvation, and another one on the place of political events and the teaching of the Church as its response. Gutiérrez found a companion in the anthropologist, novelist, and poet José María Arguedas (1911-1969), who wrote about the poor and challenged the oppression towards the poor within Peruvian society. They met at Chimbote, a coastal fishing port to the north of Lima, while Gutiérrez was

²¹ Langdon Gilkey, “The political dimensions of theology”, in Brian Mahan and L. Dale Richesin, Eds. *The Challenge of Liberation Theology: A First World Response* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981), 117; Inaugural Lecture as the Shailer Mathews Professor in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, 113-126.

giving conferences and Arguedas was finishing his novel *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*.²² Arguedas was influential in Gutiérrez and vice versa because both found that God was present in the poor of Peru, either in Chimbote or in Rimac, a Lima slum where Gutiérrez ministered through a parish and through his Las Casas Institute.²³ It is difficult to imagine but it was at the Rimac slum that Gutiérrez wrote most of his theology, teaching only part-time at the university.²⁴

²² Chimbote is described as “a coastal fishing port to the north of Lima noted for his astounding stench and pollution produced by local fishmeal factories and steel mills. A small version of Lima, Chimbote harbors masses of exploited, impoverished workers who have come from the Peruvian sierra in search of work, only to find themselves unemployed and living in hellish, concentric circles of mat houses that surround the city”, see Curt Cadorette, “Peru and the mystery of liberation: The nexus and logic of Gustavo Gutiérrez’ theology”, in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, Eds. *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), 49-58, 53.

²³ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* is dedicated to Arguedas, Gutiérrez close friend and fellow writer, both influenced by Peru’s socialist thinker José Carlos Mariátegui (1895-1930), and to the Brazilian priest Henrique Pereira Neto, assassinated in Recife on 26th May 1969, see Frei Betto, “Gustavo Gutiérrez – A friendly profile”, in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, Eds. *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), 31-37, 32, 37, and Stephen Judd MM, “Gustavo Gutiérrez and the originality of the Peruvian experience”, in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, Eds. *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), 65-76, 66-67.

²⁴ Since 2001 Gutiérrez held the John Cardinal O’Hara Chair in Theology at the University of Notre Dame. Otherwise he lived in Rimac, “a gray, dirty, noisy slum where residents are frantically trying to survive, to find or keep a job, to feed and clothe their children. It is a place where struggle is a common denominator and hope, however tenuous, is a thin thread that holds human lives together”, Curt Cadorette, “Peru and the mystery of liberation: The nexus and logic of Gustavo Gutiérrez’ theology”, in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, Eds. *The Future of*

Theology as History

If during his first theological period Gutiérrez asked questions about social and divine processes of underdevelopment and poverty during his second period of research Gutiérrez asked questions about God's involvement in human history.²⁵ Gutiérrez' understanding of human history followed the Second Vatican Council in its document on the Church in the Modern World, where the Council Fathers assert that "The Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and civilization, the centre of mankind, the joy of all hearts, and the fulfilment of all aspirations".²⁶ Those thoughts had been applied to the Latin American pastoral reality in his seminal talk to the meeting of the National Office for Social Research in Chimbote (July 1968) when he stated that,

If there is a finality inscribed in history, then the essence of Christian faith is to believe in Christ, that is to believe that God is irreversibly committed to human history. To believe in Christ, then, is to believe that God has made a commitment to the historical development of the human

Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), 49-58, 49.

²⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *La fuerza histórica de los pobres* (Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1979), English translation *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983).

²⁶ *Gaudium et Spes* 45.

race. To have faith in Christ is to see the history in which we are living as the progressive revelation of the human face of God.²⁷

His main source for this second period was the Bible and he argued for one major theological-presupposition: God became human through the Incarnation and therefore one of us. The outcome of such theological presupposition is that God acts through human history in order to save and he administers graces for human beings in order to interact in the world and be part of it. As a result religious practice (religion) takes place within a particular society that is governed not by others but by the same “people of God” with the Church as a community immersed in a particular society. However, that Incarnation as theological principle was relevant to the people of Israel in the Old Testament. Yahweh led his people out of oppression at an early stage of their history, he gave them the land, and he asked them to keep a covenant that included just and equal relations between all. Within those just relations the prophets reminded Israel of her obligations towards the poor, the needy, the widows, the orphans, and the stranger.²⁸ The demands by God in the history of Israel point to the fact

²⁷ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Toward a Theology of Liberation”, in James B. Nickoloff, Ed. *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 27.

²⁸ Juan Alfaro, “God protects and liberates the poor – O.T.”, *Concilium* 187 (1986/5): 27-35 [Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, *Option for the Poor: Challenge to the Rich Countries* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986)].

that “the history from which biblical faith springs is an open-ended history, a history open to the future”.²⁹

Gutiérrez moved to a re-reading of Latin American history by assuming God’s involvement in human history throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The history of Latin America was no different than that of Israel because within that human history there were God-fearing people who asked questions about history in order to understand questions about God. If the liberation of Israel through the Exodus made a people, Gutiérrez explored the “encounter” between Europeans and indigenous peoples in 1492. Christians led a colonial conquest based initially on ideals of civilisation and evangelisation but that subsequently was driven by human greed and an ongoing strife for riches and power.³⁰ Those who suffered poverty and social annihilation under the conquistadors became part of a society that proclaimed itself Christian and in the name of an unjust Christian relation between colonisers and colonised subjected indigenous peoples to slavery, genocide, forced conversion, and inhuman conditions of life.³¹ Nevertheless, for

²⁹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “God’s revelation and proclamation in history”, in *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 6.

³⁰ Gutiérrez prefers the term “encounter” or “collision” while those reading history from a European view-point term it “discovery” or “conquest” and others even term it “invasion” or “covering”, Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), 2.

³¹ It was in that context that the Jesuits developed safe places around the borders of current Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil, for indigenous peoples to live in well-bounded territories where they learned about Christianity, toiled the land, lived communally, and escaped the enslaving mechanism of the Portuguese slavers. The Jesuits were expelled from the Portuguese colonies in 1759, from France in 1762, and from the Spanish colonies in 1767. On the 21st July 1773 Pope

Gutiérrez, God was in Latin America in pre-Columbian times and he remained with the suffering indigenous peoples while many atrocities were taking place.

In reading Latin American history Gutiérrez isolated the example of some Christians who did not comply with the *status quo* of colonialism and degradation and became themselves defenders of the poor for the sake of the Gospel. One of them, Bartolomé de las Casas, was an example of a full conversion to the poor in colonial Latin America that allowed their voice to be heard within the Spanish Courts and the learned universities of Europe.³² Las Casas' attitude and his Christian attitude made a difference in God's action in history because he defended the poor and the needy, and in return he became a sign of contradiction that had to suffer attacks from philosophers, theologians, and conquistadors alike.³³ Those attacks came upon him because Las Casas did not only exercised Christian charity towards the indigenous population but

Clement XIV suspended the mere existence of the Society of Jesus, Michel Clévenot, "The Kingdom of God on Earth? The Jesuit Reductions of Paraguay", *Concilium* 187 (1986/5): 70-77 [Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, *Option for the Poor: Challenge to the Rich Countries* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986)].

³² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *En busca de los pobres de Jesucristo* (Lima: Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas-Rimac and Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1992).

³³ However, Las Casas was not, according to Gutiérrez, an isolated prophetic voice but he was part of a minority group that included missionaries, bishops, civil servants and even members of the royal court who expressed their concern about the fate of the Indians under the conquistadors, Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), 5.

constructed a theologically informed defence of their human rights because of their condition as children of God made in his own image.³⁴

In his defence of the indigenous populations Las Casas resembled Job, another biblical figure important for Gutiérrez. If Gutiérrez dwells on the suffering of the innocent by examining the book of Job he does so by associating the person of Job not with a passive sufferer but with an example of suffering-trust in God and his love for all.³⁵ Job in the Bible and Bartolomé de las Casas in the Latin American context become prototypes of Christian history because they are able not only to empathise with those suffering but because in enduring physical and emotional suffering themselves they see God not through a general depersonalised historical narrative but they see the poor as protagonists of that history. Thus, they develop a theology that speaks once and again of the love of God in a human history in need of liberation and not in a theology ridden with clauses, argumentations, and intellectual discourses attached to the learned and to the philosophers. In the case of Las Casas,

³⁴ Lewis Hanke, *Aristotle and the American Indians: A Study in Race Prejudice in the Modern World* (London: Hollis & Carter, Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1959), *All the Peoples of the World Are Men: The Disputation between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in 1550 on the Intellectual and Religious Capacity of the American Indians* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970), *All Mankind is One: A Study of the Disputation between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in 1550 on the Intellectual and Religious Capacity of the American Indians* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974).

³⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez,

Bartolomé welds faith to what we today would call social analysis. This enables him to unmask the “social sin” of his time. That, doubtless, was his forte – and also the difference between him and the great majority of those in Spain who were concerned with the affairs of the Indies... Those who had not seen the abuse and contempt to which the Indians were subjected, those who had not suffered in their own flesh the aggression of the mighty ones of the Indies, those who had not counted dead bodies, had other priorities in theology.³⁶

During this period of biblical and theological reflection Gutiérrez brings together the concept of the God of history, already present in his *A Theology of Liberation*, together with a shift in Latin American ecclesial history towards the place where the God of history makes his presence felt: the world of the poor. The “irruption of the poor” within Latin America suggests that the centrality of the poor within the practice of religion should bring a change in the political understanding of social, economic, and power relations. If the Christian communities of Latin America, and therefore the Latin American Church, decided to strive for the world of the poor because it was among the poor that the incarnate Son of God decided to dwell, the political world should do the same, particularly in a continent where most politicians declared themselves Christians and are part of that servant Church of the poor. The “preferential option for the

³⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), 6-7. Gutiérrez refers to Las Casas’ account of the atrocities done by the conquistadors, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (London: Penguin, with chronology and further reading 2004 [1992]).

poor” forwarded by Gutiérrez and others and sanctioned within the pastoral options of the Latin American Church constitutes not a change in pastoral orientation but “is nothing short of a Copernican revolution for the Church”.³⁷

Gutiérrez explores God’s involvement in human history through the religious practice of his Church in the past but in doing so he moves with theological, religious, and political questions that take place in the present of Latin America. The publication of *A Theology of Liberation* takes place after the implementation of the Second Vatican Council in Latin America through the second meeting of all Latin American Bishops in Medellín (Colombia), while his second period of theological reflection coincides with the third meeting of Latin American Bishops in Puebla de Los Angeles (Mexico) in 1979. While it is at Puebla that the “preferential option for the poor” is publicly declared by the meeting of bishops and within the political climate of a number of military coups, including those in Chile (1973) and Argentina (1976), the impact of Medellín remains the crucial impact for Gutiérrez’ theology. It is at Medellín that the theological movement of a Latin America driven by lay unpublished theologians began.³⁸ The Church in Latin America had to ask questions about

³⁷ Virgil Elizondo and Leonardo Boff, “Editorial: Theology from the viewpoint of the poor”, *Concilium* 187 (1986/5): ix [Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, *Option for the Poor: Challenge to the Rich Countries* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986)].

³⁸ Virgilio Elizondo has argued, for example, that “the transformative impact of the Medellín Conference on the church’s pastoral practice and theology was far greater than that exercised by any other council of the church. No dogmas or confessions of faith were questioned or challenged – Protestant or Catholic. Instead, the whole edifice of Constantinian Christian thought, imagery, and symbolism was radically challenged in the name of Christianity itself.

their religious practice within difficult political circumstances and aided by the theological reflection of Gutiérrez does not separate religion and politics, but provides a political response of commitment to political change and the defence of human rights in Chile and the opposite avoidance of any prophetic denunciation in the case of Argentina.³⁹

Gutiérrez provides a clear biblical and theological reflection that does not differentiate between religion and politics because those processes are neither separate in the Hebrew Scriptures nor in the history of the Church in Latin America. The politics of religion that a local church decides to implement cannot be influenced by theology as a second step but it reflects the first step of commitment and practice with the poor in the case of Gutiérrez, to the wealthy and powerful in the case of many clergymen and bishops of Argentina. For Gutiérrez' return to the biblical sources follows from his own commitment to the poor, his own involvement with the reading of contemporary history in Latin America, and his own involvement with important ecclesiastical figures such as Helder Camera, Pedro Casaldáliga, Oscar Romero, Evaristo Arns, and Manuel Larraín.

What was initiated was not a new academic or philosophical theology, but rather the transformation of the very structures and methods of doing theology. To be faithful and authentic, Christian theology will have to emerge out of the spiritual experience of the believing community grappling with its history and responding to its contemporary situation", "Emergence of a World Church and the irruption of the poor", in Gregory Baum, Ed. *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999), 108.

³⁹ See Mario I. Aguilar, *A Social History of the Catholic Church in Chile*, vol. I *The First Period of the Pinochet Government 1973-1980* (Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).

Religio and the Polis in Post-modernity

During a third period of action, reflection, and writing Gutiérrez asked questions about the response to God's actions in history by the Latin American poor and marginalized. They, after all, are the majority of theologians because they reflect on the Scriptures together allowing for narratives on the action of God in the world to be articulated. Their religious response through their Christian life produces different localised ways of responding to the work of the Holy Spirit, thus it produces new spiritualities.

Spirituality for Gutiérrez does not relate to a pious individual response to God in order to acquire security; on the contrary, an honest response to God creates insecurity, persecution, misunderstanding, and suffering. The actions of those who respond to the Holy Spirit do not always please the powerful and the rich, thus the poor become ever more dependent on God, not on their own means. Religion as a way of life based on the Spirit produces men and women who trust and wait for God's promises while sharing solidarity with the poor and the marginalized within communities. Thus, Gutiérrez challenges the idea of a self-sufficient individualistic spirituality that creates prosperity and security. On the contrary, he systematises the possibility of a distinct Latin American spirituality closer to the values of the Kingdom and distant from the security of riches, power, and social acceptance.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Beber en su propio pozo: En el itinerario de un pueblo* (Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1983), English translation *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984, 20th Anniversary Edition 2003).

Spirituality, for Gutiérrez, is a way of life that moves towards the poor because the poor are the ones who show more trust and need of God, not because they are better than other human beings. Spirituality is the method for theology because a way of life close to the poor comes before any theological thinking or theological writing. Thus, religion as a practice informs the involvement of Christians within politics because all actions that precede theology are enacted within society, within the polis, and therefore they are all political. Even those who practice a spirituality that agrees with the *status quo* express opinions within society, and therefore within the realm of political governance; they elect politicians, professional governors, according to their beliefs, according to their spirituality, according to their theology, according to their preferences that rationally cannot be contrary to their way of life.

For Gutiérrez, God is at the centre of that social and religious change that allows human beings to be liberated from their own personal sin, but most importantly from sinful structures that do not allow them to be fully human and in God's image. Thus, in his later work Gutiérrez who has not allowed for a separation between religion and politics returns to the theme of liberation by returning to reflections on the action of God in the Bible as liberator within a particular history. God is the God of life because he liberates. However, Gutiérrez makes very clear distinctions about the fact that God is a liberator when he writes:

God is not a liberator because God liberates; rather God liberates because God is a liberator. God is not just because he establishes justice, or faithful because God enters into a covenant, but the other way around. I

am not playing with words here, but trying to bring out the primacy and transcendence of God and to remind ourselves that God's being gives meaning to God's action. According to the Bible, God's interventions in the life of God's people do not imply any kind of immanentism or any dissolution of God into history; rather they emphasize that God is the absolute and transcendent sort of being.⁴¹

In this late reflection on God and his work Gutiérrez synthesises his theology by integrating the Latin American context and the action of the absolute being much preferred within European discourses on transcendence and immanence. The difference in his discourse in relation to other theologians is that any discourse about God arises out of a communal practice of social justice within the *polis* and not in isolation from those social realities. For Gutiérrez is not making an attempt to integrate two separate realities, i.e. religion and politics; the separation is in the mind while the practice indicates that theological discourses and the act of contemplation constitute a political act of prophetic solidarity, defiance, and a social pronouncement. It is at the end of his theological book on God that Gutiérrez discloses the possibility of a relation between aesthetics, poetics, and God's option for the poor by outlining the hope that comes out of suffering in the poetics works of César Vallejo.⁴² He does not return to theological aesthetics and

⁴¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The God of Life* (London: SCM, 1991), 2. Spanish original *El Dios de la vida* (Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1982 shorter version; Lima: Instituto Bartolomé de Las Casas-Rimac and Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1989 longer version)

⁴² Gutiérrez does not dwell on issues of contemplation but those who did, for example Ernesto Cardenal and Pedro Casaldáliga associated mysticism, aesthetics and poetics with a political

instead continues an exploration of history within a Latin American post-modernity.

Gutiérrez' later theological work, always a reflection on his pastoral work, is influenced by the preparations for the 500th anniversary of the encounter between indigenous peoples and Europeans. As the Latin American Church prepared for the 4th General Meeting of Latin American Bishops in Santo Domingo, Gutiérrez, as a theological expert, realised that for some 1492 meant a great moment of discovery, for others a great moment of evangelisation but for the indigenous peoples of Latin America it meant an encounter with a colonial machine that destroyed, enslaved, and did not differentiate the religion and politics of empire. While historians such as Enrique Dussel explored the chronological periods and changes of the Church in Latin America Gutiérrez delivered an uncompromising Christian manifesto for solidarity with the indigenous peoples of Latin America, but within the context of the Church.

The context of the Latin American Church at Santo Domingo was already post-modern and post-romantic. The military regimes in Latin America had ceased to exist, civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador were coming to an end, and the influence of a neo-liberal economic system that fostered individualism, economic prosperity, and personal salvation was felt throughout the continent. The rise of Protestantism pointed to a refreshed Christianity for Latin America but in many cases the individual salvation supported by those Christian groups

commitment to social change inspired by their Christian commitment to the poor and the marginalized, see Ernesto Cardenal, *El Evangelio en Solentiname* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1976), and, *El Evangelio en Solentiname: Volumen Segundo* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1978).

coming from North America undermined the pastoral aims and objectives of the Christian Communities. The violence of the military regimes had ended but the violent protests by indigenous peoples against the state had brought new challenges associated with indigenous rights, international laws of cultural protection, and the recovery of indigenous sacred landscapes and political spaces.

Gutiérrez took active part in the 1992 meeting of bishops in Santo Domingo and together with others he challenged the neo-conservatism coming out of the Vatican and of the newly appointed bishops, most of them of a more neo-scholastic way of thinking. If for some of them religion and politics could be separated Gutiérrez returned in his theological writings to the social doctrine of the Church and to the pastoral achievements of Medellín and Puebla. If Vatican II had prepared the way for a clear engagement of the Church with the contemporary world, it was the reflection on ecclesial praxis at Medellín and Puebla that had provided the theory and method for being religious in Latin America. The epistemology of Medellín, particularly, had indicated that it was not possible to do theology without a commitment to the poor and that to be committed to the poor a religious practitioner had to engage with the political in order to influence it for the sake of the poor. Thus, democratic or non-democratic institutions did not perceive the poor as the recipients of Good News but as a social and political problem. Economic growth and successful economic policies did not take into account the human value of the poor but were geared to maximise profit in order to implement successful economic models of development that benefited few and punished the majority that did not have resources for economic growth or investment.

For Gutiérrez, the newly centred reflections on the religious, the social, and the political stem from the centrality of the human person. Political systems that are not person centred fail to understand the beauty of God's creation of man and woman in his own image. For example, on the subject of work and coinciding with John Paul II's encyclical letter *Laborem Exercens* Gutiérrez argues that the dignity of the person who works comes from the fact that a human being is recreating the earth and not from the type of work undertaken, a clear brake from the Spanish colonial understanding that there was a higher type of work, a more intellectual one, that left a lower type of manual work to slaves and servants.⁴³ However, Gutiérrez recognises that for some commentators the Pope seems to be speaking about the third world only and that is not the case. The encyclical recalls the dignity of every human being everywhere and the absolute primacy of the human over technological discoveries, economic and political systems that place profit over workers and economic growth over human dignity. As already argued at Medellín the call of the Church is to denounce poverty but also to show through material poverty that human beings remain at the centre of passing systems, policies, and social structures, be they just or unjust. Thus, Gutiérrez argues forcefully that:

The encyclical clearly describes the universality of the social problem, the depth of the injustice and the abandonment suffered by the poor today, the responsibility of leaders of socio-economic systems which

⁴³ Paper presented at the first Hugo Echegaray University Seminar, organized by UNEC, in G. Gutiérrez, R. Ames, J. Iguíñez, and C. Chipoco, *Sobre el trabajo humano: Comentarios a la Encíclica "Laborem Exercens"* (Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1982).

violate the rights of workers, and the urgent need for the **whole** Church to make the cause of the dispossessed her own.⁴⁴

To be religious within that society that violates human dignity and favours markets over people requires a return to the body of social teaching of the Church in order not to foster academic study, but in order to give further authority to the already plentiful commitment by Christian communities towards the poor. It requires a return to the idea articulated by the Church Fathers that a Christian life needed a style of life that visibly spoke of the religious. Therefore words and confessions do not match a style of life in solidarity with the poor, in which what is given is not only the excess gained but the goods acquired by human and divine right. A style of life and a spirituality of poverty do not become an exception to ordinary life but the norm of the life of all Christians and of the Church. Thus, Gregory the Great wrote that:

The earth is common to all men, and therefore the food it provides is produced by all in common. Thus they are wrong to believe themselves innocent who demand for their private use the gift that God gave to all ... when we give what is indispensable to the needy, we do not do them a favour from our personal generosity, but we return to them what is theirs.

⁴⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Gospel of Work: Reflections on *Laborem Exercens*", in Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Density of the Present: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999), 37.

More than an act of charity, what we are doing is fulfilling an obligation of justice.⁴⁵

It is that theology of the daily life, of a style of life, and as a result of a social morality of connection with other human beings that makes Gutiérrez' theological agenda meaningful and central for a post-socialist world. Those who understood his agenda as a religious commitment to socialist ideas rather than to Christians ideas saw an end to liberation theology after the collapse of socialist states in Eastern Europe during the 1990s. However, the religious preoccupation for the poor and the oppressed could only end when there is no more poverty. Till then the voice of the poor in theology, in the practice of religion and in politics is to be heard as a central commitment to the building of the Kingdom of God now and for the future. The Church as the body of believers and as a signifier of God's presence altered the role of the poor at Medellín, where they became theological and political actors in society. The task remains, according to Jon Sobrino, to make the Church of the poor a reality in order to continue challenging the centrality of wealth and profit in the running of society.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Gregory the Great, Pastoral Rule, 3, 21, in Gustavo Gutiérrez, "New Things Today: A Rereading of Rerum Novarum", in Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Density of the Present: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999), 51, note 14. Most of these ideas were given by Gutiérrez at the Catholic University of Lima during the "Jornadas de Teología" in February 1991.

⁴⁶ Jon Sobrino SJ, "El Cristianismo ante el siglo XXI en América Latina: Una reflexión desde las víctimas, in *Teología de la liberación: Cruce de miradas* (Coloquio de Friburgo, April 1999,

Sobrino, as well as Gutiérrez, points to the fact that the Christian utopia of religion and politics has not been realised, however they remain committed to bridge any separation between religious practice and governance, between the world of the poor and the neo-liberal world that dominates Latin America at the beginning of the 21st Century.⁴⁷

Conclusions: Theological Solidarity

Within Gutiérrez' writings there is no clear separation between the religious and the political. Theological narratives about God textually re-create understanding of a divine history that it is expressed through human history, following Nicholas Lash' theological dictum: "All human utterances occur in a context. And the contexts in which they occur modify their meaning".⁴⁸ Thus, Gutiérrez provides a challenge to any privatisation of theological reflection concentrated in academia but he also assumes that a few within the theological community and the Christian community exercise their Christian mission within universities and theological colleges.

Lima: Instituto Bartolomé de Las Casas-Rímac and Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 2000), 207-238.

⁴⁷ In 1999 Gutiérrez argued that "Estamos ante una estimulante y prometedora tarea en la que la teología de la liberación tiene mucho que hacer, y sobre todo por aprender", in "Situaciones y tareas de la teología de la liberación", *Teología de la liberación: Cruce de miradas* (Coloquio de Friburgo, April 1999, Lima: Instituto Bartolomé de Las Casas-Rímac and Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 2000), 239-264, 264.

⁴⁸ "Theologies at the service of a common tradition", *Concilium* 171 (1984/1): 74 [Claude Geffré, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Virgil Elizondo, *Different theologies, common responsibility: Babel or Pentecost?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1984)].

For Gutiérrez, the relation between the practice of religion and the practice of politics needs to be articulated through the Christian faith. Within that relation commitment to the poor and the marginalized in the name of God provides the first step of involvement by Christians in the world, and particularly within the social context of Latin America. That commitment to justice and to the poor is the first step in any theological reflection about the world and its relation with God. Faith comes first, and reason follows because “theology is an understanding of the faith. It is a rereading of the word of God as that word is lived in the Christian community” so that “we can separate theological reflection neither from the Christian community nor from the world in which that community lives”.⁴⁹

Gutiérrez’ reflection on the relation between religion and politics presupposes an ongoing commitment to God through the poor of society that is inscribed much later in theological narratives about the love of God for human beings and the need for the theologian to immerse himself in that extension of the incarnation in contemporary human history. Thus, his theologising differs from political theology, theologies of development, and theologies of revolution because in all those theological movements the articulation of ideas and writings comes first, the practice of religion and politics comes second. What unites all those theological models is a Christian response to individualistic models related to romantic movements, post-enlightenment ideas, and the post-modern condition.

⁴⁹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Liberation praxis and Christian Faith”, in *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 36.

Religion as the practice of faith becomes politics because Christians involve themselves in their own contexts in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized. If the response to modernity had been to reject the world and establish immanent truths with the help of reason and philosophy, Gutiérrez provides a continuity to Bonhoeffer's theological commitment by assuming that at the root of a Christian response to modernity is the search for a life in Christ that is lived "irreligiously" by expressing solidarity with others.⁵⁰ For Bonhoeffer to practice religion was to assume the life of the weak and suffering God of the Cross; for Gutiérrez to practice religion is to assume the politics of the weak and the suffering human beings who represent the face of God.⁵¹ Solidarity with the oppressed presumes a critique to the political establishment that in most cases has failed to protect the poor and where Christians had failed to practice the ethical values of religion within the social spheres of political influence. If initially Gutiérrez could have followed some of the Latin American theologians calling for a socialist oriented society his methodological critique of the possibility of a single political model and a continuous solidarity with the poor have made Gutiérrez' forceful assessment of the religious and the political even

⁵⁰ "The vanguard of Protestant theology would become the great Christian theology of modernity, for it was a current that would lend an attentive ear to the questions asked by critical reason and individual liberty in this society forged by the bourgeoisie. For a number of historical reasons, this theology would centre in Germany, the land of the Reformation", Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Theology from the underside of history", in *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 178.

⁵¹ On Bonhoeffer see Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Theology from the underside of history", in *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 179-181.

more important in understanding the involvement of Christians within the contemporary world in a post-Soviet Union and post-9/11 world.⁵²

In the words of Gutiérrez:

We shall not have our great leap forward, into a whole new theological perspective, until the marginalized and exploited have begun to become the artisans of their own liberation – until their voice makes itself heard directly, without mediation, without interpreters - until they themselves take account, in the light of their own values, of their own experience of the Lord in their efforts to liberate themselves. We shall not have our quantum theological leap until the oppressed themselves theologise, until “the others” themselves personally reflect on their hope of a total liberation in Christ. For they are the bearers of this hope for all humanity.⁵³

The conclusion is simple: the sole practice and advancement of theology depends on the right relation between religion and politics; thus, the theological project is

⁵² “It [the revolutionary struggle] insists on a society in which private ownership of the means of production is eliminated, because private ownership of the means of production allows a few to appropriate the fruits of the labour of many, and generates the division of society into classes, whereupon one class exploits another”, Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Liberation praxis and Christian Faith”, in *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 37-38.

⁵³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Liberation praxis and Christian Faith”, in *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 65.

to be realised as a second act of solidarity rather than as the only possible intellectual response to human solidarity - and therefore becoming a selfish individual act. Thus, “in searching for this meaning, the theologian knows that, as Clodovis Boff says, everything is politics but politics is not everything”.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Frei Betto, “Gustavo Gutiérrez – A friendly profile”, in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, Eds. *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989), 31-37, 36.