

Liberation Theology and Marx Knowledge Organiser



Key words:

- **Alienation:** The process of becoming detached or isolated
- **Basic Christian Communities:** Christian groups that gather to try to directly resolve problems in their lives
- **Capitalism:** An economic system in which the means of production are privately owned and operated for profit, in contrast with communism where the state controls trade and industry.
- **Praxis:** Understanding a situation and then bringing about a change in it; a critical reflective process that moves from theory to action
- **Orthodoxy:** Right belief
- **Orthopraxis:** Right action
- **Preferential option for the poor:** Acting in solidarity with the poor and oppressed
- **Structural Sin:** Social dimension of sin, beyond individual sin. It is an attitude of society that contributes to oppression.
- **Reversal:** The idea that justice in the Kingdom of God is about reversing the opportunities of those on earth (for example, the poor shall become rich)
- **Hermeneutic of Suspicion:** The process of interpreting the Bible (hermeneutics) by asking questions that have not been asked before to challenge traditional or official interpretations; in the context of liberation theology, its focus is on economic movements



Introduction

A Christian based community is one that brings together the poor and oppressed and feeds them, provides pastoral care, teaches them the basics of faith, and so on. As such, these communities feel in control of their faith and beliefs, and people are empowered to feel active parts of the Church, from the bottom upwards, even if the nearest church and priest are miles away. In Latin America, these base communities play a real part in establishing the solidarity required for making a significant change in the lives of the poor. Liberation theology likewise works from the base upwards, focusing on the real needs of the community and emphasising good action before deep theology. Much of this approach comes from the influence of Marxism, but liberation theologians are divided about how influential Marxism should be within society.

“We believe that from the transcendence of the Gospel, we can assess what the life of the poor consists of and we also believe that placing ourselves on the side of the poor and attempting to give them life we will know what the eternal truth of the Gospel consists of.” (Oscar Romero, speech, February 1980)

Background

Marx introduced the idea that when humans are unable to live fulfilling lives due to being ‘dehumanised’, this results in a form of alienation. Humans are dehumanised when they are exploited, and this is a result of being treated as objects and used as a means to an end.

Marx’s teachings on alienation and exploitation have been used by liberation theology to analyse the ‘structural’ causes of social sin that have led to poverty, violence and injustice. Such ‘structural’ causes include capitalism and institutional (schools, churches and the state).

The analysis of structural sin has led to a call for the ‘**preferential option for the poor**’ – a calling for Christians to act in solidarity with the poor, rooted in the Gospel. **The implication of this teaching is to place orthopraxis (right action) before orthodoxy (official Church teaching).**

Marx’s teachings

The teachings of Karl Marx (1818-1883) are best understood through his underpinning of praxis:

- Society is constantly changing through history: going through conflict, stability and then conflict again
- Change comes about through analysing a situation
- Then working out the reasons behind it
- Then changing it



Alienation and Exploitation

After an initial period of harmony, society broke down and people are now in competition with one another; they are means to ends – objectified. So, humans became dehumanised and were unable to live fulfilling lives – **exploitation**. Marx identified some key factors in this concept:

- ❖ Religion and belief in God has brainwashed people into thinking that God is the cause behind change in the world, rather than physical processes – this is an illusion that causes false hopes in people (for example, an afterlife)
- ❖ Religion tells people that some people are born to rule over others and that everything will be equalised in the afterlife. This objectifies some people and alienates them.
- ❖ Capitalism, which is driven by profit, makes some people objectify others (such as workers being ‘owned’ by the ruling classes); society would be better off under communism, where everyone shares equally
- ❖ The production line makes everyone depersonalised and therefore alienated; workers simply ‘make’, not create, are paid and then have to spend their earnings in places owned by the ruling classes.



Marx’s teachings continued



The fewer ruling classes (bourgeoisie) control the many workers (proletariat) who are alienated, exploited and objectified. Religion is an additional tool to ensure that they are kept in their place, with the promise of a better future in the afterlife.

In Marx’s analysis of history, he saw times when the workers had tried to resist this way of life, but had been met by violence and, in his view, the society of his time demonstrated this very specifically.

Marx said that religion is one of the more powerful tools to oppress the workers. **“Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opiate of the people”** (from the introduction to a book on Hegel).

Opium as a drug was used to dull pain and get away from the troubles of this world. The alienated and exploited people were ‘given’ religion in the same way.

Praxis is therefore required. Marx believed that, having reflected on the causes of alienation, an uprising would need to take place to install communism as the right way for society to exist and to reject the capitalist machine.

Marx’s teaching on alienation and exploitation help us to think about the people involved in the production of things we value. Marx would say it does matter and should matter that we appreciate the persons involved in the stages of production and do not just see them as a means of production. If we do the latter, we alienate them from society.

Furthermore, technology has revolutionised the world but with the more apparent power we have in this development, the less in control we actually feel. Marx said there is a human cause behind this feeling of powerlessness.

When humans reached the ability to produce surplus to requirements, the favour was granted to those who controlled the means of production and herein begins class division. This division is evident through the ownership of land, where labour is bought and sold – people are treated as means and not ‘ends’. Marx laid the foundations for socialism and communism through his criticism of capitalism – the private ownership of land.

This private ownership changed the relationship between people and the means of production, leading to the exploitation and alienation of the workers.



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What does this look like?

1. **Feudal Lords:** own the land and the means of producing food
2. **Serfs:** work on the land but don't own it. They rely on feudal lords for access and must give surplus to feudal lords
3. **Subservient:** Serfs alienated from the land on which they work

This system can be likened to working in a factory. Here, people only understand the part they work on and do not have sight of the whole process. In this way, they are dehumanised. The work is necessary as, without it, we could not pay for our survival. In this way, exploitation becomes a means to an end. Workers form part of a supply chain and do not know the 'purchasers'.

Neither do those purchasing know the workers – people are alienated from their work. Our 'happiness' at cheap prices comes at the expense of other people's happiness – at the expense of the exploitation of others.



Liberation Theology

Liberation theology began as an intellectual and practical theological movement among those who worked with the poor. **Paulo Freire** described the process of 'conscientisation' – a process by which someone becomes aware of the power structures in society. Freire argued that education should teach people to read the power structures and should work to transform society and not just to transmit information.

Traditionally, theology focussed on passing on information. Liberation theology focused on action before explanation – orthopraxis before orthodoxy. Liberation theology became, therefore, a theology of action.

Liberation theology proposed that the Kingdom of God is not a place we go to when we die; but is something to work for in this life.

Analysis of social sin



The uprising that Marx said was required seems, in the 1970s, to be taking place in Latin America, where many poor people were under the control of oppressive governments; workers were alienated; capitalism and industrialisation were prioritised. Industrialisation filtered into key institutions, including schools and the State, as well as the Church.

Gustavo Gutierrez (1928-) is a central figure in the foundation of liberation theology. He believes his theology has been influenced by Marxism, though most liberation theologians are quick to point out that there is only one true teacher, Jesus, and that Marxism is an 'instrument' that helps the methodology of liberation theology. Gutierrez argued that liberation occurs two-fold:

1. **Social and economic:** poverty and oppression are the consequence of human choices and therefore humans can resolve as well. Hence an idea of social sin.
2. **From sin:** to be reconciled with the Divine

Both 'social and economic' and 'from sin' aspects of liberation must happen together. Gutierrez claimed that political liberation is the work of salvation. He emphasises earthly liberation, whereas **Juan Segundo** emphasised spiritual liberation.

"The denunciation of injustice implies the rejection of the use of Christianity to legitimise the established order." (Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*)

Liberation theology believes that the Christian must not stand back; the class struggle is too great. Society has inequality at its heart – structural inequality – and this leads to structural sin – the social sin that is deeper than any individual sin. Capitalism has not worked and liberation theology believes that praxis is required to change these structures. Socialism is the best of the current alternatives, though still not ideal.

- ❖ Structural sin is the ultimate form of alienation because every member of society is alienated
- ❖ It is also something Christians are familiar with because of the idea of Original Sin – humans are corrupted and need to break away from it as much as possible



Liberation theology embraces the idea, found in **Luke's Gospel** in particular, of reversal. One of Luke's themes is social justice and the social revolution that Christianity promised. The Kingdom of God is not in the distance heaven, but among us. To read Christianity the way many commentators think Luke wanted means:

- Theology starts with the earth and people, not with doctrine or God
- The poor (proletariat) become drivers for action (praxis)

The hermeneutic of suspicion is considered useful in liberation theology. As a way of interpreting the Bible, it places a Marxist reading on texts and applied them to the needs of an alienated society.

In 1979, a meeting of Latin American bishops made the following points about structural sin:

- The Church needs to challenge social sin as much as individual sins
- The Church must not mirror the oppressive bourgeoisie and should let the people have a say in its decisions
- The Church needs to re-find itself as a community, not as an institution.



Preferential option for the poor

Preferential option for the poor reflects the core message of the parable of the **Sheep and the Goats**, that humans will be judged based on their recognition of Jesus in the needy. The phrase implies that the Gospel demands that Christians must give priority to the poor (when they can: it is aimed at the rich and influential) and act in solidarity with them (in the same way that Jesus did). It can be justified in five ways:

1. God is a living God who seeks justice for his people
2. Jesus worked for the poor
3. We will be judged based on our response to the poor
4. The first Apostles looked after the poor
5. Christians should work for the common good and try to transform society



Christians should not stand by when presented with injustice or human suffering as all people are made in God's image and likeness. Inspired by Marx, liberation theologians prioritise action, called orthopraxis, over belief (orthodoxy).

Liberation theology places orthopraxis before orthodoxy. In terms of the preferential option for the poor, this places feeding the hungry before making them believe in key aspects of the faith or before being obedience to the rules of the Church. Therefore, the preferential option for the poor starts with the reality 'on the ground' and works from there.

Orthopraxis starts with living among the poor, in solidarity, visiting and caring for them as much as teaching them. After this, is it possible to explore the context of the people 'on the ground': why are they poor? How does the Bible speak into this context? What action must be taken?

The Kingdom of God must be brought about on earth for those who are alienated and live in poverty. For some, this has been interpreted as requiring violent struggle: **Camilo Torres Restrepo**, a Catholic priest, joined the Columbian National Liberation Army and was killed in action, standing up for the oppressed.

Gutierrez did not promote violence, but did not reject it outright. He said that liberation takes place over two stages, both of which are essential.

1. Fixing the human-made problems of poverty and oppression through human methods – liberating them from structural sin
2. Liberating people from personal sin and promoting reconciliation



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Some liberation theologians however suggest that spiritual liberation should come first, such as **Juan Segundo**, who argued that Christians can definitely free people from personal sin, but may or may not be able to change social structures.

The Catholic Church has taken time officially to welcome liberation theology. **Pope John Paul II** endorsed the phrase ‘**preferential option for the poor**’ but also emphasised spiritual poverty alongside material poverty. Pope Benedict XVI was suspicious of the Marxist influences and (before he became Pope) argued that the Catholic Church would work for the poor but not using Marxism as a tool. **Pope Francis**, who comes from Latin America, has endorsed much of liberation theology, although distanced himself from the Marxist aspects of it. He himself lives a simple lifestyle and has criticised capitalism. In 2015, he names **Oscar Romero**, the Archbishop of San Salvador who was killed as a liberation theologian, a martyr of the Church.



“If Jesus were alive today, he would be a guerrillero.” (Camilo Torres Restrepo)

Juan Segundo wrote that the Church “intends to struggle, by her own means, for the defence and advancement of the rights of mankind, especially of the poor”. Since we are made in God’s likeness, human dignity should be central to what we do. By failing to intervene and by allowing an ongoing social divide, we would prove incompatible with the peace and justice advocated in the Bible.

Segundo different to Gutierrez because he argued that liberation from sin (spiritual liberation) should come before social liberation, as social liberation might not be possible.

Even Jesus taught *“the poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me” (Matthew 26:11)*. Segundo still taught we should prioritise the preferential option for the poor – now gained acceptance beyond liberation theology.



Assessing Liberation Theology



Should Christian theology engage with atheist secular ideologies?

Some Christians would argue that Christian theology should keep away from atheist ideologies. In the example of liberation theology and Marxism, there is some suspicion about a worldview that begins with a rejection of God and religion as one of the key tools of oppression. Here there is a direct contraction between a fundamental aspect of Church teaching and a key element of Marxism. The Church should be prepared to remain distinctive and not try to assimilate with such beliefs because it would suggest that truth can be found outside the revelation of Jesus Christ and the Bible.

However, those Christians who take a natural theology approach might say that reason can be (partially) accurate outside the Church. In this case, it is right for Christianity to engage with other ideologies, even if only to use them as tools to help its own reflection.

The key to this question is what it means to ‘engage’ with an ideology.

Many Christians would say that they should not be afraid of discussion and debate.

However, others would say that the Bible contains all that is required to live life and no outside discussion is necessary.

Does Christianity tackle social issues more effectively than Marxism?

Some might accuse Christianity of being too gentle when it comes to tackling poverty and oppression, and would argue that the revolutionary uprising approach of Marxism is the only way to bring about significant change.

However, where revolutions have brought about communism, it is debatable whether this approach has been entirely successful.

Christianity accepts that suffering is a part of life and tries to engage with that at every level, but it is most effective when it does so at a local level.

Where Christianity is most effective is where each individual responds to the need to build the Kingdom of God in their own context, rather than the Marxist approach of tackling society on a larger scale.

The key difference between Christianity and Marxism is, of course, the spiritual dimension. Christians would argue that the reality of God can touch people’s lives in a very real way; Marx rejects religions and says it is too focused on the afterlife. Christians might say that religion is more about people in this world than about the afterlife.

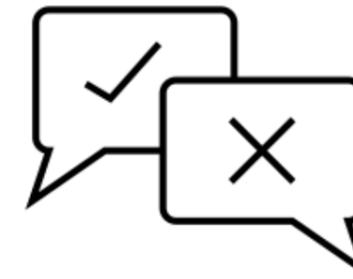
“When I gave food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” (Archbishop Helder Camara, in Z.Rocha, Helder, the Gift)

Has liberation theology engaged enough with Marxism?

Most liberation theologians see Marxism as a tool to help reinterpret the Christian message in a specific context. However, as we have seen, there is the full range of approaches to this question.



There has not been enough engagement	There has been too much engagement
Marxism calls for an uprising; Christianity does not seem to have made enough impact doing it more gently	Communism has been shown to be unsuccessful and so Christianity should not have linked itself with this approach
There has been too much attention to Marx’s atheism – more thought about the causes of alienation and ways to tackle this would create deeper changes	Liberation theology has lost sight of Jesus’ death on the cross, which liberates people from sin first and foremost
Many of the processes of the two ideologies are similar: the importance of analysing history, the importance of working towards a better future	Liberation theology argues that praxis will bring about change; the Christian message should be that God’s grace will bring this about
Fear of Marx’s atheism or promotion of violence has led his approach to be diluted too much; Christians now talk about spiritual poverty and don’t place enough focus on real, material poverty.	Liberation theology has skewed the debate: it suggests that it is the only way to counteract issues in society, whereas society is significantly more complex than this approach suggests.
Christianity needs to understand from Marx the importance of re-evaluating society in each new stage of history – it can then have an impact even beyond the current aims of liberation theology, such as in modern secular society.	Marxism contains areas that deny the importance of the individual and that deny God’s existence. It is too dangerous to engage with some of it as it might lead to unorthodox beliefs entering the Church.



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Bonaventure

Bonaventure criticised liberation theology for prioritising action over the Gospel. He claimed that liberation theology equated theology with politics and as a result, side-lined Christian evangelism. Bonaventure highlighted that liberation theology focused on structural and not personal sin – despite Jesus’ emphasis on personal reconciliation with God.

However, for the starving and oppressed, one can question whether liberation from sin is more important than social liberation. Jesus did teach the importance of inner spiritual change, but he also called for real action – seen in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25). The election of a Latin American Pope might signal the beginning of real impact of liberation theology. Pope Francis named Oscar Romero a martyr and asked Gutierrez to be a keynote speaker at a Vatican event in 2015.

However, a 2017 visit to Myanmar, Pope Francis failed to explicitly denounce the persecution of the Rohingya Muslims by supposedly pacifist Buddhists.

Is it right for Christianity to prioritise one group over another?



Liberation theology very specifically prioritised the poor and oppressed over other groups. The Bible is clear that God works for the poor and needy and Jesus came to bring salvation to outcasts. However, it is not just the poor who are outcasts. This might be behind Pope John Paul’s call to widen the scope to the spiritual poor as much as the materially poor.

As Jesus taught in the parable of the **Rich Man and Lazarus** (Luke 16:19-31), the rich need as much salvation as anyone else. In this parable, the rich man who ignores the poor Lazarus at his gate ends up in hell and he is told that he had the opportunity to prevent this if he’d paid more attention to the teachings of the Scriptures. Arguably, liberation theology could be over-emphasising the poor to the detriment of the rich: Jesus died for all people. A response might be that it is not so much the right that are condemned for being rich, but those rich people who do not help the oppressed.

The different Gospel writers all present the Jesus story in slightly different ways, probably because they were emphasising different things for the different communities they were writing for. Perhaps Christians need to follow their lead and consider who those most in need are in their own communities – at a local level – and then, at this local level, to prioritise those who need it.

“Jesus said, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but the sinners.’” (Mark 2:17)



Reading the Bible with liberation theology

Applying liberation theology’s hermeneutic of suspicion to Biblical texts can be a useful way to engage fully with the approach that liberation theology takes. For example:

- When God says that he has heard of the misery of his people in Egypt (Exodus 3:7) and he is concerned about their suffering, he is speaking as much to the poor and oppressed in Latin America as he was to the Israelites in Egypt. God offered a way of breaking free towards a promised better future.
- The rich man and Lazarus story in Luke 16:19-31 makes us question how the rich man became rich and analyse how even in Jesus’ time the alienation of the proletariat was taken for granted.

Paul’s very short letter to Philemon shows him pleading for good care of the slave Onesimus.

