Faith in Civil Society
Religious Actors as Drivers of Change

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Liberation theology

Introduction

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Religious actors have often been considered obstacles to change and defendants of status quo. Liberation theology may be seen as an alternative and an example of how faith and theological reflection can be instruments for social change. The reflection of liberation theologians has resulted in political action in many societies, Brazil being one example. Liberation theology was of course not the only factor that brought the workers’ party (Partido dos Trabalhadores – PT) and its leader Lula to the presidency, but certainly one important factor.

Liberation theology on development

Liberation theology was born in the 1960s as a reaction against a one-sided view on development, often called developmentalism, desarrollismo in Spanish. When the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez first spoke of liberation theology in July 1968, he was invited to speak on “A theology of development,” but as he entered the lecture hall he went up to the blackboard, wiped out the word ‘development’ (desarrollo), and replaced it with ‘liberation’ (liberación). In an article in a North American journal in 1970 when he had elaborated his lecture further, he says:

[…] we are particularly sensitive to the critical function of theology regarding the Church’s presence and activity in the world. The principal fact about that presence today […] is the participation by Christians in the struggle to construct a just and fraternal society in which men can live in dignity and be masters of their own destinies. We think that the word ‘development’ does not well express those profound aspirations. ‘Liberation’ seems more exact and richer in overtones; besides, it opens up a more fertile field for theological reflection. […] Liberation, therefore, seems to express better both the hopes of oppressed peoples and the fullness of a view in which man is seen not as a passive element, but as agent of history (Gutiérrez 1970, p 243).

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Ever since then, this critical view on development has characterised most liberation theologians. The stress on liberation, I would say, is a substantial contribution to any strategy or theory on development, not only 30–40 years ago, but relevant for today’s discussion as well. A conclusion to be drawn from this critical position is that when we speak of development, we must never lose this liberation perspective.

Is liberation theology still relevant, then, 40 years after the publication of the first edition of Gutiérrez epoch-making book *A Theology of Liberation*? Even though it may not appear as often on the agenda of the general theological discussion as it did 30 years ago, the first generation of liberation theologians are still writing, and younger liberation theologians are presenting themselves, to an extent that it is possible to even talk about a second and third generation of liberation theologians.

**Theological reflection and political analysis**

To what extent is liberation theology and similar theologies from other religious traditions of any influence, as we analyse religious agents’ contribution to social and political change?

It is important to point out that liberation theology is not a political programme; it is a theological reflection:

> It is a theological reflection born of the experience of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human. [...] My purpose is not to elaborate an ideology to justify postures already taken [...] (Gutiérrez 2001, p 1).

Paradoxically, there is an implicit critique of the Roman Catholic social doctrine that claims to represent “the third way,” between socialism and capitalism, a position that has characterised the Christian democratic parties not least in Latin America. Liberation theology, however – a theological reflection considered to be ‘political’ – criticises this third way for being *too* political.

Characteristic for liberation theology is the *see – judge – act* model, where the first step corresponds to an analysis of the actual context, the second to an assessment of this context from a theological point of view, and the third to some kind of action based on this judgment.
In my own research on the theology of Gutiérrez (Kristenson 2009), I sketch him as a pastoral theologian who tries to respond pastorally to the political context. I identified four discourses in his texts, on which I built my analysis, discourses that show how Gutiérrez’ theological reflection is constructed, and reflect how he relates a socio-political analysis to his theological reflection. The discourses interact, and through this interaction Gutiérrez formulates his pastoral message. For his socio-political analysis, he uses two political discourses, which I call the radical and the liberal political discourses respectively. The radical discourse deals with justice for the poor and liberation from oppression as a prerequisite for peace and harmony in society, which make up the focus of the liberal discourse. With the Catholic theological discourse Gutiérrez sets the socio-political analysis in relation to Catholic doctrine, and through the pastoral theological discourse he responds pastorally, as an advocate for a theology of life, in contrast to the violence and premature death that characterise the reality of especially the poor. If the pastoral theological discourse is what really concerns Gutiérrez, the other three are nevertheless needed to sustain it. Relating the four discourses to the see – judge – act model shows how they relate to each other: the two political discourses are necessary for the socio-political analysis, to see; the Catholic theological discourse gives criteria for assessment, to judge; and the pastoral theological discourse intends to respond to the specific situation, to act.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
<th>Content</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>See</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical political discourse</td>
<td>True peace can only be achieved if violence and unjust structures are attacked at their roots.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberal political discourse</td>
<td>A nation must be constructed on democratic principles and respect for human rights.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Judge</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic theological discourse</td>
<td>The God of life provides life for all. Solidarity with the poor is &quot;prompted by faith&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Act</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastoral theological discourse</td>
<td>To give reason for hope and promote action.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In this table, we may change ‘Catholic theological discourse’ to ‘Doctrinal theological discourse’ to open up the perspective and make the model applicable to other religious traditions as well. I believe that this model can be used as an instrument for seeing how theological reflection and political analysis interact – an interaction that is essential to any theological reflection that intends to be credible in our society. Religion and theological reflection can never be separated, or distanced, from the socio-political context. They may encourage people to act for social change, but they do not prescribe a specific political ideological means. And that brings us to two central questions, developed in the ensuing articles:

- What actually, are the political implications of religion and theological reflection?
- How far can theological reflection go before it is converted into politics?

The example from Brazil addresses how liberation theology became an inspiring force that formed members of Christian base communities to become leaders, thus having a multiplying effect. The case from Egypt describes how religion can be both a political force for public mobilisation and an ‘extreme force’ leading to fundamentalism. And the case from the Netherlands analyses how the dualism between the religious and political mission can be overcome, contrasting the position that churches should abstain from political activity and a biblical interpretation of the political implications of the Christ’s life, death and resurrection.

References


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