Liberation Theology

The trend in contemporary Catholic theology called “liberation theology” shares some features with the Franciscan movement and other “evangelical” movements around the time of Francis in that it is an attempt to go back to the Gospel and the practices of the early Christian community.

Biblical foundations and general description

A passage from Isaiah 61:1, “The Lord has anointed me to preach good tidings to the meek..., to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound,” consistently with Jewish law, suggests that God intended to liberate the poor and the oppressed. Jesus was seen as the one bringing this liberation. We have seen at the beginning of the class that Jesus’s Kingdom of God can be interpreted as a Buddhist-type liberated state of mind, or as a type of passive non-violent resistance to current socio-economic powers. However, some liberation theologians point out that there are passages in the Gospel that go beyond that and suggest social action and even social unrest, not peace. These passages, they think, are a call to action against poverty and oppression, to effect God’s justice, or Kingdom of God, already in this world. Examples are numerous:

Jesus seems to be thinking in terms of two opposing camps: “He that is not with me is against me...” (Matthew 12:30); “he that gathereth not with me scattereth” (Luke 11:23).

The opposite camp, as he lashes out against the Pharisees, is not to be treated gently: “Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up” (Matthew 15:12).

Some statements clearly do not suggest peace: “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father...” (Matthew 10:34-35); “Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division: For from henceforth there shall be five in one house divided, three against two, and two against three. The father shall be divided against the son, and the son against the father...” (Luke 2:51-53).

Here is what will happens to the opposing camp: “And shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 24:51).

Finally, he tells his disciples to have a physical sword at their side when he sends them, and if they don’t have one, he tells them to go and buy one: “And he who has no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one” (Luke 22:36).

Thus in its fight against poverty, social injustice, and oppression liberation theology explores the relationship between Roman Catholic theology and political activism. The novelty of approach is seeing theology from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed (see notes on Leonardo Boff below). Liberation theology seeks to interpret the actions of the Catholic Church and the teachings of Jesus Christ from the perspective of the poor and the disadvantaged. By approaching theology “from the perspective of the poor,” Liberation theologians believe that
they can turn the poor from an object of the assisting efforts of the Church into the subject of the actions of the Church. In Latin America, liberation theologians specifically target socio-economic disparities between the rich and the poor and critique the economic and social structures that create these disparities, such as oppressive governments or “free market” strategies of developed Western countries.

**Gustavo Gutiérrez**

Gutiérrez (born 1928) is a Dominican friar and a Peruvian Roman Catholic theologian who is credited with coining the term “liberation theology” with his book *A Theology of Liberation* (1971). He combined socialist currents in the Church at that time, such as the Catholic Worker Movement, with the social teachings of the Catholic Church. According to Gutiérrez, although it is Christ who liberates the human race from sin, the human being in history assumes responsibility for human destiny. Gutiérrez emphasized practice (using the Greek term *praxis*) over doctrine. He starts with the Jewish tradition, where prophets frequently condemn oppression and injustice against the poor and thinks that to know God rightly (ortho-doxy=right doctrine) means to *act* rightly (ortho-praxis=right practice).

Gutiérrez notes that Vatican II speaks of the “theology of the signs of the times” (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 44), which is a call for action, for commitment, for service to others, not only for intellectual analysis and understanding, as in traditional theology. The traditional principle of “faith seeking understanding” should be interpreted as “faith seeking action.” The Church’s presence and activity in the world should inspire actions, to start bringing about the Kingdom of God in the “heart of human history.”

In his “Notes for a Theology of Liberation” Gutiérrez prefers to speak of “liberation” as opposed to “development”—the translation of the Latin *progressio*—the term adopted by the Vatican in the encyclical *Populorum progressio* and used in other documents, e.g., in the *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (see next section of the course on contemporary social teachings of the Catholic Church). Due to the current sociocultural transformation in the world, humans have become “fully aware of the economic basis for that transformation.” However, the notion of “development” (as in “developed countries,” “economic development”) is not adequate. It can be pejorative or patronizing (e.g., “developed” countries vs. “underdeveloped” countries) and it “does not seem to express well the yearning ... for more human living conditions.” The transformation that we are speaking about should include not only the GDP and the total wealth (because this may leave in place economic elites and powerful groups that oppress the poor), but also ethical values and a humanistic view where humanity takes charge of its own destiny. This change of perspective is more appropriately called “liberation.” What should be attacked is poor people’s dependence on the rich and powerful, against oppression and domination (cf. Boff’s analysis of types of poverty below). The *Populorum progressio* already uses similar language by “speaking of fully human life free of servitude.”
Notes on Leonardo Boff, *Francis of Assisi: A Model for Human Liberation* 
(numbers stand for page numbers from the Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006 edition)

Born in 1938, Leonardo Boff is a Franciscan friar and a Brazilian Roman Catholic theologian.

**Chapter 2, “Preferential Option for the Poor”**

46, The greatness of Francis “consisted in seeing the poor with the eyes of the poor” and in discovering the “values of the poor”

*Traditional attitudes of the Church toward the poor:*

48, Wealth as a means of charity and assistance to the poor is legitimated in the New Testament by St. Paul: *your abundance may be a supply for their want* (2 Corinthians 8:14); *Charge them that are rich ... that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate* (1 Timothy 6:17-18).

*Attitude: the Church for the poor:*

48-49, Traditionally, the poor were seen from the perspective of the rich, inferior and in need, the object of charitable activity. The strategy took the form of “aid and paternalism” (based on the model of the parents aiding their helpless children), pretty much until the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). “Society is not questioned by such assistance; social positions are respected.” The practice of aid to the poor by the rich is developed as a one-sided movement, from the rich to the poor, “without taking into account the organizational and transformative ability of the poor themselves.”

[Oleg’s comment: the principle of the type “throw them a bone” without changing your comfort zone or any significant sacrifice; rich individuals can control where their surplus will go or not go based on their whim, which is not right. The poor should be able to demand their share, not to wait until some rich person decides to help them out of charity.]

49, The basic principles of “care for the poor,” which are basically the same as in the Franciscan tradition: (1) God is the owner of the goods at hand; the individual is merely the administrator, not the owner; (2) “the surplus of the rich is what is needed by the poor”; “alms are a necessity of justice and not an expression of charity”; “the poor may appeal to the bishops to demand that the rich comply with their duty of charity and justice for the poor”; various Church statutes enforced this principle.

There were also discussions about the “rights of the poor” (similar to Marx’s way of thinking about distribution of wealth); “it is by divine and human right that the starving man forced to rob is innocent”; “by natural rights, all things are common, and in time of necessity all things must be placed in common”; “the life of the poor is worth more than the property of the rich; in case of absolute necessity, the poor individual may spontaneously take what has been denied him or her”; a movement from the “economy of alms and gifts” to an “economy of restitution by right.”

50, Gradually, the poor start to be seen as having value in their own right, not simply a tool for the salvation of the rich. Boff mentions the evangelical “poverty” movements of the 12th
and 13th centuries including the Waldensians, the Humiliati, etc.. There is a shift from the model of “generosity to the poor” to the model of “living together with the poor,” i.e., being poor yourself, which he sees as precursors of the modern “preferential option for the poor and oppressed” by the Church [note the term, which is the hallmark of liberation theology].

50, Boff expressly mentions Marx in a brief analysis of the industrial revolution and the worsening of the problem of the poor on a worldwide level.  
51, His analysis of the Church’s response to the socio-economic situation in the world is not positive: the Church “arrived too late at a comprehension of a society of classes”; its documents “do not go beyond calling for exterior changes, remaining far from the Marxist contribution to the development and organization of the libertarian struggles of the working class.” The Church only condemned abuses. The first time the Church risks condemning capitalism as a system is in Populorum progressio (1967, Paul VI), no. 26 (see next section of the course).

Boff’s own idea is not to make the poor guests at the table, but to change the situation to allow them to earn their food. [Cf. Francis’s attitude to work and statement of human dignity]

**Attitude: a Church with the poor:**

51, The Church finally discovers the sufferings and the “institutionalized violence” to which the poor were submitted. It discovers the “value of the poor, their ability to resist, the dignity of their struggle, their solidarity, their strength” (in “gentleness for life and family”), and their “ability to evangelize the entire Church.”

52, The Church finally begins to see the poor with the eyes of the poor and (beginning with Vatican II documents) begins [just like Marx!] to perceive the necessity of “structural changes in society” to insure greater justice, communion, and participation. With the “solidarity with the poor” option, “the Church overcomes the merely moralistic and assistive vision and assumes a political perspective.” The poor have their organizations, and the Church “proposes to support their cause and be with them in their hopes for change.” “The whole social system is questioned and a more humanitarian ... alternative is postulated.” The idea is to promote such an organization that would allow people to live the Gospel “in a way committed to social change in the direction of the goods of the Kingdom, [here on earth!] which are more authentic fraternity and a more effective participation.”

**Different types of poverty described by Boff:**

53-55, (1) Poverty as the lack of means; its opposite is the wealth of means; the Christian attitude is neither poverty nor wealth, “but rather the just measure, granting privilege to being over having,” and “solidary uses over individualistic consumerism.”

(2) Poverty as a result of social relations of exploitation: enrichment at the expense of impoverishment, which is injustice hateful to God; this impoverishment “is a real social sin.” There are multiple statements in the Old Testament against the rich, the oppression of the poor, and that God will liberate the poor, cf. Psalms 72:2-4: “There will be justice for the lowly, he will save the needy and destroy the oppressor.” Jesus echoes these sentiments in Luke 4:17-21 [cf. our analysis of the Gospels]. The opposite of this poverty is justice.
(3) 55-56, Poverty as an evangelical way of life: the idea that we receive everything from God, therefore “we are to keep nothing for ourselves”; “all that we have ... must be placed at the service and need of others.” [Cf. Francis’s attitude: “render all the good things to God”] Poverty is an attitude that is needed to belong to the Kingdom. “To be poor is the same thing as being simple, detached, and ready to give and receive”; it is a “radical conversion of the heart.” [In other words, Boff here sees poverty as the attitude of detachment and openness of the will, just as Olivi.]

(4), similar to (3) 56, Poverty as asceticism, or as “poor use”; “a life of poverty as an ascetic way of liberating the spirit of the instincts to possess ... material goods”; “moderate and sober use of goods, which may vary in accordance with places and cultures, and whose meaning, however, is always retained” [cf. Olivi!]; an “option for the poverty” here equals “an ecological mentality ... a sober and anticonsumeristic life.”

(5) 56-57, Poverty as solidarity and identification with the poor, in protest and anger against the dehumanizing effect of poverty, the poor being scorned and abandoned. The opposite of this poverty is selfishness and insensitivity. On p. 57 Boff gives a selection of scriptural quotes about Jesus being poor, similar to those that Francis and Olivi used. This “option for the poor can be realized in two ways: (a) participating in their struggle for survival” even without social changes or organizing themselves; (b) “fighting for the cause of their liberation” through changing the society [cf. Marx].

The rest of the chapter analyzes these ideas as being inherent in Francis’s position:

63-64, Francis specifically spoke against appropriation [cf. similarity with Olivi’s idea of free will that is expanded with disappropriation]: “Francis makes illegitimate any appropriation, soul of our capitalist system, in the following way: ownership looks for security, prejudices the community and neighbors, is inspired by passion and pleasure, wounds the soul, searches for one’s own well-being, degrades work, overvalues the corporal, sees in intelligence and will a private property, is the road of sin and the devil, enemy of all good, taking sides against God and denying his Kingdom. ...It appears to be the desire for wealth, domination, envy, presumption, pride, hunger for honor, and glory, and it promotes intrigue. On the other hand, disappropriation is rejection of security, the worries of this world, money; it is liberation for the others, liberation of wanting to know, being right and dominating; it is to be small; it serves the Kingdom of God and ... is the best way of following Christ. Disappropriation is seen in poverty, in humility, joy, service, obedience, simplicity, and purity of heart, love.”

64, Boff thinks that “to be radically poor” amounts to being “fully human.” [Cf. Olivi!] Francis noticed that “fraternity between persons and the encounter with God are blocked and even destroyed by the desire for possession.”

67-68, Boff notes that at the time of Francis any attempt of social change was unthinkable, so his personal “liberation” or “option for the poor” consisted in living with the poor and assisting the poor (type of poverty no. 5a above). 69, Boff also notes that Francis’s initial ideas and practices of “solidarity with the poor,” as it usually happens to all spiritual movements, were adapted to
the practices of the society and forced to the position and “practices of solidarity with the poor from the position of the rich,” i.e., to the position of “assistance and paternalism.”

However, Boff also notes that today different historical and theological conditions exist: the Church is no longer linked to the power hierarchy as it was in the Middle Ages. So he thinks that “the Church can be, today, essentially what it wants to be: a Church of the poor and from the poor....”

70, Boff lays out the socio-economic platform not unlike Marx’s: “highly participatory social forms [the ideal for the option for the poor] are only possible on the condition that there first be built an infrastructure capable of producing abundance. ...Concrete democratic socialism ... would only be viable on the presupposition that capitalism had accomplished its historical mission,” which is creating material abundance. “The construction of socialism would only be real upon the foundation of a society of abundance.” But Boff also notes the negative possibilities: socialist systems are prone to degenerating into totalitarianism of the state, making the collective participation of the people impossible. [So Boff’s ideal is not totalitarian socialism but a truly democratic type, perhaps present in some Western countries.]

Chapter 3. “Liberation through Goodness: The Contribution of St. Francis to the Integral Liberation of the Oppressed”

73, Boff mentions the three pillars of modern “hermeneutics of suspicion”: Marx focused on the “liberation of the proletariat from capitalist economic domination”; Nietzsche focused on liberation of life from traditional metaphysics, morals, and culture; Freud focused on the liberation of the psyche from subconscious problems.

74, Even though many of these thinkers were atheist, Boff notes the Jewish influence, including Marx and Freud: “They carried with them the liberating wisdom of the Old Testament prophets and the sense that history continually should be made to be worthy of the Creator.”

Theology of Liberation

74, Currently we are in the situation of “social and structural sin,” so society must change; “the transformation of society must be made by the poor and their own real strength.”

75, The Gospel of Jesus Christ is “a factor of concrete and historical liberation”; “the Kingdom is made present.” The perspective of liberation “allows the rereading of the liberation movements of the past,” including secular ones, as “theologically relevant, although they have not been supported by the Church, and although, in some cases (as the socialist and workers’ revolution), they have taken a position contrary to Christendom.” [That is, Boff can support even the Marxist point of view as long as it contributes to the liberation of the oppressed.] “Grace and the Kingdom do not find in the Church exclusive mediators” [Cf. Crossan’s lecture on Jesus and also the position of Martin Luther King against the present “weak” Church that no longer follows the Gospel, e.g., in the matters of racism at his time.] “Christian faith in the universal presence of God and Christ within history makes it possible to read with a theological key the emancipatory processes that produce humanization and a greater sphere of freedom.”
“Faith is salvific only when it is translated into a praxis [note the important term also present in Gutiérrez] of love; today, this praxis rises above the merely personal and must assume a structural and social character.” [This means that we need to change society, not just our personal attitude.]

76, Boff makes a very important observation: salvation today “finds its dominant and most valuable expression in the social and political dimension, because this is the area where the greatest human decisions are made and it is where God is primarily served or offended.” He calls for “a liberating evangelization, urging a Christian practice that implies also a transformation of society”; “it is not enough for faith to want the transformation of society. Effectiveness depends on the intelligent comprehension of social mechanisms, especially of those that generate poverty, and of the steps necessary for a qualitative change toward more human ways of life together.” [Note similarities with Marx: we need to understand the socio-economic mechanisms and then use them to ensure justice for the poor and the oppressed.]

“To aid in the effectiveness of faith, liberation theology develops a methodology, ... a specific procedure of reflection and practice.” [This is similar to the methodology of Martin Luther King’s non-violent protest strategy.]

(1) Analyze the sociohistorical reality; discover the antagonistic class structure; the poor are poor “because of the way society is organized: since they have the strength to work but not the capital, they are placed on the margin.” [Cf. Marx]

(2) Judge this reality in the light of faith (is it just or not just from the Gospel perspective). 

(3) Act, which is more important than either analyzing or judging; the Church acts by “leading people to take on a commitment” for “social transformation as a way to concretize and anticipate in the world the Kingdom of God.”

78, The Church “organizes the people in Christian communities”; they meditate on the Word of God and in this light discuss their problems and ways of solution. “These base communities [note this key term for the way liberation theology works concretely in South America] have an immediate and direct religious value, but they also achieve social importance because they are places for the formation of social conscience, responsibility, and the desire for change.”

The Church also seeks “communication with other social groups that are also involved in the structural change of society” and “supports the movements that are born of the base—free unions, people’s associations” etc.

Boff notes that this strategy was condemned by some as “an increment to class struggle,” and some ministers were killed for their involvement. But he thinks that their blood is worth the “historical liberation of the oppressed,” just as Jesus’s. “It is the price one must pay for the activity and struggles to liberate the captive. Freedom is never freely granted; it must be attained in an arduous process of liberation.” [These words are similar to Martin Luther King’s in the “Letter from the Birmingham Jail.”]
The rest of the chapter is devoted to Francis as being the model for liberation, with the analysis of the Rule and other familiar themes:

89, According to Boff, Francis was “fundamentally a free man. The freshness of liberty shines through his gestures and words. This freedom is the fruit of the painful process of liberation.”

79, The theme of liberation can be found in analyzing the categories of poverty, authority, fraternity, money, obedience, the Saracens from Francis’s Rule. Thus Francis places everything on the same plane, as if everything had the same value, and denies criteria of priority. [Cf. Olivi’s analysis of highest poverty.]

81, Boff comments on poverty movements around the time of Francis and notes that the great majority of these groups were lay people. Francis “leaves the world” (cf. Francis’s Testament and D. Flood’s analysis) in the sense of leaving “that type of relationship and interest.” 82, Francis was “a great revolutionary, not a mere reformer”; he radically criticizes the dominant socio-economic situation and calls for a strong response; he desires for “liberation from the social relationships of the time.” Thus Boff sees Francis as the first liberation theologian.

84, Boff notes that true fraternity would not be completely liberated “if it were not open upwardly, in a true cosmic democracy with all creatures”; he notes Francis’s particular spirituality of fraternity with animals and inanimate creatures.

Boff sees principles of the “preferential option for the poor” in Francis: “he did not see the poor primarily as objects of aid. To be poor like the poor is superseded by being with the poor in deep solidarity.” This is not a “pedagogy for the oppressed, but a pedagogy of the oppressed: it is a way of rescuing the value of the poor, their power of evangelization, and of avoiding help that is not at the service of their creativity and values.”