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Liberation theology: an interview with James Nickoloff

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

The topic of liberation theology has been raised in the media quite a bit since the election of Pope Francis, mostly in response to the charge that Francis, like his two most recent predecessors, had a negative view of the movement.

In so many of essays and blogs I've read about the topic, I have been struck by the simplistic characterizations of liberation theology. Many writers reduced it to a political movement or identified it closely with Marxism. I realized that few of these commentators were experts in liberation theology and even fewer had spent any time out in the field where this school of thought developed. I wanted to talk to an authority on the issue, and in my search I found James B. Nickoloff. I found our conversation so helpful, I decided to publish it as my column this week.

Nickoloff is associate professor emeritus of religious studies at College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass., where he taught systematic theology for 20 years. He has also lived and worked for extended periods of time in Andong, Korea; Kingston, Jamaica; and Lima, Peru. While in Lima, he lived and worked with Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, a founder of the liberation theology movement, in the parish where Gutiérrez served pastor. He also studied at the Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas, which Gutiérrez founded and directed.

Nickoloff is the editor of *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings* and the co-editor (with Orlando Espín) of *An Introductory Dictionary of Religious Studies and Theology*. He currently teaches at Barry University, the University of Miami, and the Catholic Theological Union (Chicago).

Since the 1980s, we have heard about the institutional church's reservations about liberation theology and, in some cases, bishops cracking down on liberation theologians. As a student of Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the founders of liberation theology, would you help us understand more fully the concerns of the magisterium about this movement?

I think it's important to start out by saying that I'm speaking from my own limited perspective. I have more knowledge and experience in the field than some others, but I don't have the whole picture by any means.

What I would point to as the concern in certain quarters of the institutional church (which includes bishops, priests and laypeople) is a sense that what liberation theology was really pushing for was raising the consciousness of people at the base of society.

Gutiérrez talks about three levels or dimensions of the process of liberation. The first is social, political, economic, structural transformation. The political and theological projects come together in the second level, which is psychological transformation. The third level is transformation in Christ, which is the turn from self-centeredness and sin to God.

The connection between social, political, economic and structural liberation and spiritual liberation occurs, in his view, in the transformation of human consciousness. That's the link between the two. Gutiérrez and many other liberation theologians are convinced that preaching the Gospel with integrity can actually encourage the Christian portion of the population to undergo this psychological transformation. That's what he saw happening in the 1960s and '70s in various kinds of movements of the poor and marginalized, including women's groups, farmers and workers.

Why would this be perceived as threatening?

I think anybody who is enjoying the privilege of power in the status quo is going to be at least wary of, if not opposed to, this raised consciousness among the poor and marginalized.

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If we look at the last election in our own country, it could be argued that what happened was that a lot of marginalized people, many of whom may not even know the history of the civil rights movement or the women's movement, had had their own consciousness affected by what happened 30 and 40 years ago. The work of decades of activism bore fruit. And many people with money and privilege proved powerless against this change in consciousness.

I think this is analogous to what has happened in the church. Of course, not all bishops were afraid of the masses beginning to see what's really going on. We have the example of Archbishop [Oscar] Romero and other bishops who went to jail and even paid with their lives. But there have been efforts by some to co-opt the church's solidarity with the poor and turn it away from what we would call liberation and justice and instead focus on charity. So they favor increased charity, care and almsgiving, but they are not as interested in changing consciousness.

What are the signs of a bishop's commitment to the ideas of liberation and not just charity?

When church officials advocate for the poor, it's important to look at the content, not only the titles, of the programs they promote. Being critical of unbridled capitalism is a good sign. But it's important also to

look at whether their church activities have the aim of raising consciousness, raising people's awareness of unjust power structures. We have seen a great example of this in Lima, Peru, over the past 50 years where the church's educational programs, seminars and work with poor communities around the city and the country had the purposes of teaching the Bible and looking at structural issues. But the main purpose of these programs was to push people to grow up and to have a more sophisticated understanding of themselves, their dignity and their situation.

Some argue that the problem with liberation theology is that it contains Marxist elements and relies on Marxist analysis.

The same charges were made against Martin Luther King, that he was a Marxist. Back then we were in the era of the Cold War and McCarthyism. If you look at the history of any uprising by the powerless or marginalized in history, long before even Marx came along, there is always resistance to it by the privileged of the status quo.

If liberation theologians used the categories of Marxist analysis in the '60s, it was to analyze structures of power in society. But I don't think that was really the reason why there was opposition. In my view, it had to do with the transformation of human consciousness; that is, helping people at the base begin to see themselves as equal to anyone else.

We know that Pope Francis and his two predecessors, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, were critical of liberation theology. Yet they also criticized raw capitalism and espoused serving the poor, which sounds a lot like liberation theology.

The main work of liberation theologians is still raising the consciousness of Christian believers. It can come in the form of education or political action, but ultimately it is concerned with transforming human consciousness and, in this way, calling people closer to God. This is what Gutiérrez has dedicated his life to. There has been some vindication in terms of the magisterium's acceptance of his theology. But I think he will be like Moses, led to the river and looking across into the Promised Land, but he will not get there. Even on the issue of poverty, the situation is worse than it was 40 years ago. The gap is widening because of the continued takeover by corporate interest. The work of raising consciousness and working at the grassroots is crucial.

Some in the church have become adept at co-opting the word "liberation" and the language of the preferential option for the poor. Many leaders in the church are still steeped in the mindset of Catholic corporatism. The institutional church is strictly ordered, and many in the hierarchy are uncomfortable with disorder and chaos. But we know from psychology and pedagogy that any human learning process is messy. I think some church leaders were and are trying to maintain order *and* make life more comfortable for the masses of people, but they are not really committed to helping everybody be an adult, sit at the table, and have a voice, whether in the church or society. Real democracy is messy, and growing up is messy and filled with conflict, and I think that's what many in the institutional church have been uncomfortable with. They want the poor to be better off, but always while maintaining order, and ultimately, that means not allowing anyone outside the power structure to tell them what to do.

Given that, globally, women suffer disproportionately from the effects of poverty and many gays, lesbians and transgender persons live under the constant threat of attack, imprisonment and even death, is it fair to include them in liberation theology's understanding of "the poor"?

If we're going to look at this from a biblical point of view, I would go with Jon Sobrino's analysis. When Sobrino looks at the New Testament, he sees two groups that Jesus consistently takes particular care to stand with: the economically poor and the socially marginalized -- those who are outcasts for various

reasons. The notion of the preferential option for the poor goes back to the Hebrew Bible, but its contemporary formulation is less than 40 years old. We're still rediscovering what is in the tradition and waking up to what it really says to our current situation.

Because of the situation that the first liberation theologians were living in, which was massive political and economic injustice, they linked what they saw in the Gospel to that reality. But as time has gone on, they have been expanding the idea. The inclusion of women and the issue of violence against women globally is front and center in a lot of liberation work these days. Pushing this to include sexual minorities is just the next, logical step.

I think we see it happening in parts of the church. In Massachusetts, I got to know some legislators during the marriage equality vote. Most of them were Catholic, and they spoke movingly about how their faith required them to vote in favor of these rights. They weren't exactly using the theological language of the option for the poor, but that's what they were talking about. Giving priority to those who have been left out. I think Catholic people get this notion of option for the poor. It's in their bones.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her *NCR* columns have won numerous awards, most recently second prize for Commentary of the Year from Religion Newswriters (RNA).]

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