

Introduction

For decades, liberation theologians were suspected by the Vatican of teaching revolutionary and unorthodox ideas. Times have changed. In a unique turn of events, Gustavo Gutiérrez, the founding father of the liberation theology movement, has now become a welcome guest at the Vatican. The Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), Cardinal Gerhard Müller, has invited Gutiérrez to speak during a book launch for Müller's new book, *Poor for the Poor: The Mission of the Church*. This book has two chapters written by Pope Francis and it focuses on explaining and defending liberation theology. Müller, a protégé of Benedict XVI, wholeheartedly supports liberation theology because he believes that it is based on the Word of God and not on human ideology. This theology focuses on Jesus Christ's role in redeeming humankind not only from sin but from sinful social and political structures as well. Liberation theology is now considered to be a significant current in Catholic theology of the twentieth century.

Gutiérrez published *A Theology of Liberation* in 1971. It was a pioneering work that exercised a profound influence on the theological landscapes not only of Latin America, but also of Africa and Asia. Because of its revolutionary call for the transformation of unjust social and economic structures by employing social and economic analysis to understand the causes of poverty, it was considered dangerous in some conservative Catholic quarters. As a result, Gutiérrez and many other liberation theologians were investigated by the CDF when it was under the leadership of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (the future Pope Benedict XVI). However, in 2014, Gutiérrez returned to the Vatican and was honoured for his pioneering work in liberation theology.

During the same year, the Vatican investigated and threatened to censure an Indian Jesuit theologian, Michael Amaladoss, a specialist in inter-religious dialogue and inculturation, for purportedly promoting unorthodox beliefs. This comes as a surprise, as most people think of Pope Francis as being more open to new ideas than his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI. Moreover, Müller, in his role as head of the CDF, appears to be adopting a stricter policy than the flexibility and openness of Pope Francis's statements would suggest. Some people have speculated that the Vatican is concerned about the new book by Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus*, which raises several Christological issues. Amaladoss responded to the Vatican's objection to his views on the uniqueness of Jesus and the Church. But the CDF, apparently not satisfied with his response, demanded that Amaladoss publicly accept the Vatican's position or face punishment, which in this case meant that he would be forbidden to teach or write. This was the same sanction used by the CDF under Joseph Ratzinger to deal with theologians it considered recalcitrant.

Here we have two distinguished theologians from the Third World, Gustavo Gutiérrez, O.P., from Peru, and Michael Amaladoss, S.J., from India, one celebrated and the other threatened with censorship in the same year for their innovative theological writings that attempt to make the Gospel message more relevant to the people in their respective continents. Peter Phan, a leading Asian theologian, has said to me personally that, although Amaladoss was recently cleared, it is still necessary to compare his treatment with that of Gutiérrez to understand the parallels between Latin American and Asian theologies. Phan considers this a very worthwhile project.

In view of the above, I have embarked on this work, *A Tale of Two Theologians: Treatment of Third World Theologies*, in order to examine the writings of these two theologians, Gutiérrez and Amaladoss, and to highlight their main concerns regarding evangelisation and the poor. This work also attempts to find out why liberation theology from Latin America is now accepted and celebrated by the church while Asian theology with a liberation approach is still viewed with suspicion.

Liberation theology, essentially a Western discipline, has been easily rehabilitated and accepted by the Church hierarchy. With its roots in the Old Testament, albeit using modern social analysis, the theology of Gutiérrez falls within the European intellectual tradition. Jürgen Moltmann puts it this way:

Japanese theology, done in the Buddhist context, forces Western activists again and again to fundamental reorientations of their interests and thought forms. . . . But up to now scarcely anything comparable has come out of Latin America. We hear severe criticism of Western theology and of theology in general and then we are told something about Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, as if they were Latin American discoveries.¹

Asian philosophical and religious traditions, however, pose a greater challenge to the Church's contemporary theological formulations than liberation theology. In fact, Joseph Ratzinger has said that 'the challenge to the church in the twentieth century would not be Marxism, but Buddhism.'²

The Vatican, therefore, will continue to be more alert and stringent towards theologies that spring from an Asian well with an emphasis on religious pluralism, dialogue with non-Christian religions, and inculturation. It is easy for the CDF to evaluate theologians that operate within a European philosophical and theological framework in relation to the magisterium's teaching. But dealing with scholars who experiment with the finer points of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism requires expertise and training that most Vatican officials and theologians lack. In addition, there are many Church officials and scholars, including Müller, who, like Ratzinger, believe that the Hellenistic framework through which Christianity has been presented is actually providential and God-given and thus should not be altered. As Ratzinger explains:

The encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance. The vision of Saint Paul, who saw the roads to Asia barred and in a dream saw a Macedonian man plead with him: 'Come over to Macedonia and help us!' (cf. *Acts* 16:6-10) – this vision can be interpreted as a 'distillation' of the intrinsic necessity of a rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek inquiry.

This inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry was an event of decisive importance not only from the standpoint of the history of religions, but also from that of world history – it is an event which concerns

1. Jürgen Moltmann, 'An Open Letter to José Míguez Bonino', (March 29, 1976) in Alfred T. Hennelly, ed., *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 196.
2. Leo D. Lefebure, 'Cardinal Ratzinger's Comments on Buddhism', *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 18 (1998), 222.

us even today. Given this convergence, it is not surprising that Christianity, despite its origins and some significant developments in the East, finally took on its historically decisive character in Europe.¹

In view of the above theological position, Asian theologians like Michael Amaladoss continue to walk a tightrope, balancing between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, proclamation and mission, noting the uniqueness of Christ and speculating about universal salvation. In contrast, the controversial Marxist overtones found in Gutiérrez's liberation theology are now considered harmless or dated given the fact that Communism in most countries has collapsed. Marxism is now considered a pastime for academics in the West. Besides, the theme of liberation has been part of the social teaching of the church since the promulgation of *Populorum Progression* by Pope Paul VI in 1967:

What are less than human conditions? The material poverty of those who lack the bare necessities of life, and the moral poverty of those who are crushed under the weight of their own self-love; oppressive political structures resulting from the abuse of ownership or the improper exercise of power, from the exploitation of the worker or unjust transactions. What are truly human conditions? The rise from poverty to the acquisition of life's necessities; the elimination of social ills; broadening the horizons of knowledge; acquiring refinement and culture.²

On the other hand, Christianity is much younger than Asian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, and the Church has serious reservations about accepting these venerable traditions as valid paths towards salvation. The declaration *Dominus Iesus* reminds us: 'If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that *objectively speaking* they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the

1. Pope Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with the Representatives of Science' (Regensburg Lecture), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html.
2. *Populorum Progressio*, Encyclical of Pope Paul VI, On the Development of Peoples, March 26, 1967, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html, no. 21. This encyclical was considered by the *Wall Street Journal* to be 'warmed over Marxism'. Arthur F. McGovern, *Marxism: An American Christian Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981), 115.

Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation.¹ Thus Michael Amaladoss ruffled a few feathers in the Vatican when he claimed that non-Christian religions were ways to salvation and he portrayed Jesus in exotic Asian images such as *Avatar*, *Satyagrahi* and *Guru*, which might imply a diminishing of his divinity.

Outline and Sequence of the Work

Chapter 1 shows that in spite of the controversies surrounding the theology of liberation, Gustavo Gutiérrez is in fact a traditional theologian, steeped in Biblical exegesis and Church teachings. Influenced by the Dominicans and contemporary European philosophical traditions, Gutiérrez's theology has a prophetic and mystical dimension valued very much in the Church. Gutiérrez was investigated by the CDF, but he was never censured because he theologises within an accepted ecclesial context. This chapter also provides a biographical sketch as a background to understanding his theological approach and position.

Chapter 2 examines Gutiérrez's definitions of poverty in different contexts, especially his understanding of the preferential option for the poor. It also explores the irruption of the poor as they make their presence felt in history. This includes Gutiérrez's endorsement of conscientisation and class struggle; a highly controversial subject, given its Marxist overtones. It has been observed that the phrase 'preferential option for the poor' goes back to Pope John XXIII's call for a church of the poor. Pope Francis is determined to make this a reality.

The prevalence of human poverty and deprivations forced Gutiérrez to discover the best way to make the Gospel relevant to our contemporary situation. He believes that Marxist analysis can enhance Christianity's understanding of social and political dilemmas. Chapter 3 thus investigates Gutiérrez's critical use of Marxism and discusses to what extent one can be a Marxist and a Christian at the same time.

Nicolas Berdyaev, a Russian Orthodox existentialist philosopher, was in many ways a liberationist and his work foreshadowed the theology of liberation. Chapter 4 first discusses the Orthodox Church's reservations about liberation theology in spite of the fact that Russians, like people

1. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration 'Dominus Iesus' on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html, no. 22.

in Latin America, have suffered much hardship and exploitation. Nonetheless, there were Russian thinkers such as Berdyaev whose writings displayed critical awareness of their social and political realities. In spite of their diverse backgrounds, the writings of Berdyaev and Gutiérrez display striking similarities in their social and political analysis in the light of Biblical tradition.

Chapter 5 provides a biographical sketch of Michael Amaladoss's early life; his training as a Jesuit as well as his works in India and Rome. This chapter examines his cultural roots and his effort to enter dialogue with Hinduism, the faith of his ancestors and the majority of his compatriots.

Amaladoss insists that Christianity cannot claim exclusivity or monopoly over the salvation of humankind. He claims that the saving action of God is one but it is mediated through different symbols. Adopting a symbolic approach to religion enables him to accept the validity of other religions without compromising his Christian convictions. Chapter 6 thus examines Amaladoss's use of symbolism as a hermeneutic key to comprehending religious pluralism in India.

Supporting the Asian bishops' teaching on evangelisation, which includes the building of the local church, Amaladoss also praises their new understanding regarding salvation and their perspective on the world. Chapter 7 discusses Amaladoss's insistence on inculturation as part of evangelisation. To the extent that the church in India has failed to inculturate itself, it has failed in the task of evangelisation.

Claiming that 'Jesus is the Christ, but the Christ is not only Jesus', Amaladoss argues that Jesus as a human person is limited by time and space. In view of this limitation, Chapter 8 examines his attempt to portray Jesus in images that are relevant to Asians. This includes his portrayal of Jesus as the *Way*, according to the New Testament understanding of him as well as the Taoist view, as *Guru* in the Indian monastic tradition, and as *Avatar*, the god-man in the tradition of Hindu deities such as Vishnu, Rama and Krishna.

Finally, in the Epilogue, I highlight the similarities and differences between the theology of liberation presented by Gustavo Gutiérrez and Michael Amaladoss, and contrast the Church's celebration of Gutiérrez's writings with its cautious approach towards Asian theology. In spite of Pope Francis's familiarity with Amaladoss as a Jesuit, Amaladoss was still suspect, though eventually cleared. Needless to say, Joseph Ratzinger still exercises strong influence over the Vatican's theological direction through his protégé, Müller, prefect of the CDF. This, of course, is understandable for a church that is anxious to protect its

own sphere of influence. The case of Amaladoss can be summed up this way: 'How long would someone working for GM who was actually selling Fords last?'¹

SAMPLE

1. Question asked by Joseph Fessio, S.J., a former student of Joseph Ratzinger at Regensburg University, regarding inter-religious dialogue. Quoted in John L. Allen, Jr., *Pope Benedict XVI* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 111.