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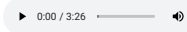
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## A Non-Hagiographical Obituary of Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez and his Contribution to Indian Theologies

October 27, 2024 Team ICM Features

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Dr. Subhasis Chattopadhyay –

Mario Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian novelist in his fiction shows the abject condition of Peru and the world during the last century. It took the works of the just deceased Peruvian Dominican, Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez to wake the world from its deep elitist slumber. Llosa and Gutiérrez have shaken the conscience of most of us who have seen the poverty of the last century. While Llosa will never be censured by anyone, Gutiérrez sadly was censured by the very Church he loved and reformed. Gutiérrez possessed what Walter Brueggemann calls 'the prophetic imagination' in Brueggemann's eponymous book. And like all Biblical prophets, Gutiérrez was misunderstood by many well-meaning Catholics and yet Gutiérrez never ceased his prophetic mission. Therefore, we must first see why he was censured. And when we do that we need to remember the censure also comes from God who works through human agency. Often, it is important to not forget the value of being circumspect. One of the greatest men of the Church whom this author loves and respects is St. Ignatius of Loyola. That Saint insists on the virtue of circumspection. Thus, before we hastily condemn the condemnation of Gutiérrez by ecclesiastical authorities, we should learn from those censures.

Before uncritically praising the works of Fr. Gutierrez, we need to pause and reflect on the Catholic Church's official understanding of liberation theology. This notwithstanding the fact that Fr. Gutiérrez's death has been mourned by Pope Francis. We in India need to assess his contributions to Indian forms of Christianity and even Hinduism. On a personal level this author feels a light has been snuffed out from this already darkening world but at the same time, we need to remind ourselves that we do not have sufficient distance from his life to assess his value as a scholar who remains controversial within the larger Church. Uncritical hagiographic praise is dangerous for any community, and one is afraid that we are too hasty in praising the entirety of his academic work. First let us evaluate the merits and the demerits of liberation theology within an ecclesiastical theoretical framework and then we shall turn to the Indian scenario and see how Fr. Gutiérrez's death affects us here in India.

Liberation theology is a Latin American movement within the Roman Catholic Church. Liberation theology now informs nearly the entirety of Roman Catholic theology. This theology is taught throughout India today. Yet liberation theologians have been consistently censured by Pope John Paul the Great and by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger before Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI. But the Catholic world, by and large, has forgotten the warnings of Saint John Paul the Great and Pope Benedict XVI. The dangers of Communism were felt so strongly by Bishop Karol Wojtyla that even before he was elected Pope, when Wojtyla took the name John Paul II; he had been able to single-handedly bring about the fall of Communism in his own country, Poland. This, since Wojtyla foresaw the draconian nature of Marxism as a lived reality and was thus determined to free Poland from communism.

Communism, according to Wojtyla, posed a threat to civil society since it erased gender differences and encouraged abortions in the name of the autonomy of the female body. Further, both Popes were to their dying days, totally against homoerotic unions and anything which critiqued Roman Catholic traditions. Marianne Duddy-Burke, executive Director, Dignity USA says in Edward J. Renehan Jr.'s book *John Paul II in the Modern World Leader* series that "It was under this Pope that 'the language of 'objectively disordered' and 'intrinsically evil' as applied to gay and lesbian people emerged as sort of official Vatican policy" (82). Meanwhile, in Latin America, there arose a resurgence of Marxist thought fuelled by the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez and others like Juan Luis Segundo SJ and Archbishop, Dom Helder Câmara. In a different context, we would do well to remember that the Saint, Archbishop Oscar Romero was gunned down for living out, as it were, the visions of liberation theology as were Jesuits at El Salvador. But returning to the just deceased visionary Fr. Gutiérrez's influence, we find that now his works are taught throughout the world as also in our country. His book, *On the Side of the Poor: The Theology of Liberation*, is a paradigm shifting work whose echoes seem to have grown only stronger with time in Indian and the global Catholic Church.

In a certain sense, Gustavo Gutiérrez's insights and interruptions within Roman Catholic thought are no less than the effects of the works of St. Thomas Aquinas, the medieval writer of the monumental *Summa Theologica*. Gutiérrez was followed by academic stalwarts like Jon Sobrino. The Jesuit, Fr. Sobrino's allegiance to liberation theology is attested by his works like *The True Church and the Poor* and *Jesus the Liberator*. Cardinal Ratzinger who had yet not become Pope

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**Catholic Church and its Immense Contribution**

Benedict XVI, had this to say about liberation theology and its underlying principle: Marxist materialism:

"Liberation is first and foremost liberation from the radical slavery of sin...Faced with the urgency of certain problems, some are tempted to emphasize, unilaterally, the liberation from servitude of an earthly and temporal kind. They do so in such a way that they seem to put liberation from sin in second place, and so fail to give it the primary importance it is due. Thus, their very presentation of the problems is confused and ambiguous...

Impatience and a desire for results have led certain Christians, despairing of every other method, to turn to what they call "marxist analysis."...Let us recall the fact that atheism and the denial of the human person, his liberty and rights, are at the core of the Marxist theory. This theory, then, contains errors which directly threaten the truths of the faith regarding the eternal destiny of individual persons.

Moreover, to attempt to integrate into theology an analysis whose criterion of interpretation depends on this atheistic conception is to involve oneself in terrible contradictions. What is more, this misunderstanding of the spiritual nature of the person leads to a total subordination of the person to the collectivity, and thus to the denial of the principles of a social and political life which is in keeping with human dignity" (*Introduction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"*, issued by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith).

This long quotation was necessary to illustrate the main objections to Marxism which the Roman Catholic Church has to this day —Marxism reduces human persons in the here and the now to commodities which react to merely materialist forces. Further, Marxism degrades the autonomous and unique soul to one among many other similar souls with nothing to differentiate one from the other. This is contrary to both Roman Catholic dogma and Christian beliefs as also it flies against the face of core Hindu beliefs as found in the *Upanishads*, the *Tantras*, the *Agamas*, and the *Bhagavad Gita* and other *Gitas*.

Christianity believes that each one of us is unique and no two souls are comparable with each other. It is another thing that the future Pope here warns that classical Marxism denies God and therefore the human soul. The latter according to the Bible, remember, is an image of the former. In the name of an equitable society, we have a dystopia; a nightmare of automata whose hour has probably come around at last in the form of Artificial Intelligence.

Liberation theology, seen through Catholic theology of the last century, instead of freeing humanity from the dangers of sin and hell, hurls it into the political sphere which in effect denies the "immanence of history" (ibid.). Pope John Paul II had also written about this atheistic quick-fix and seductive aspect of liberation theology in his encyclical titled *Centesimus Annus* where he warned that liberation theology offers an "atheistic" solution, which deprives man of one of his basic dimensions, namely the spiritual one." Liberation theology, which is at its core repackaged political Biblical hermeneutics, tends to throw the baby along with the bathwater. In the hands of lesser intellects than Gutiérrez, it easily degrades into rants against the very fabric of human culture so cherished by the Roman Catholic Church.

Notwithstanding the dangers of espousing liberation theology within the fabric of Christianity, we have Wong Tian An, who teaches at the University of Michigan-Dearborn write in his book, *An Asian American Theology of Liberation* (2023):

"To put a spin on Marx and Engels, the spectre of liberation is haunting us. If anything, the events of the last decade only underscore their continuing relevance. Rather than doing away with liberation theology, as some have suggested, what is needed is a deeper commitment to the principles of liberation and, as with all activist work, to view the work as a lifelong struggle that must be passed on from generation to generation" (*Introduction* 9).

Now we will try to understand why in spite of inviting successive Papal censures, Wong Tian An praises Gutiérrez and now we have Pope Francis praising him unconditionally. Further we will search for the reasons why Indian Catholic theologians have collectively agreed with most of what liberation theologians have to say. This with the caveat that the white world has been much slower in agreeing with Fr. Gutiérrez than us in India. The first reason Pope Francis sees absolute merit in Fr. Gutiérrez's approach is because the current Pope comes from an impoverished country. The income inequality in Argentina is so huge that the current Pope naturally sees a prophetic figure in Gutiérrez. The situation of India is worse; our income inequality is only increasing exponentially and Gutiérrez's understanding of religion as a force against what Robin Seelan SJ calls "epistemic injustice" in his soon to be published book on religious symbols and interreligious dialogue, seems to be the best theoretical and practical method to bring some hope for our people. Even this author, who is a staunch Hindu cannot help but think that Pope John Paul the Great and Pope Benedict XVI were reacting to their times and perhaps, both their observations need to be considered as being what the Salesian theologian, Roger Burggraeve calls process theology. It is now well understood within both Hindu and Christian theological circles that our theologies at the most are not only process theologies but fallibilist theologies. This is necessitated by the nature of the Godhead that both theologies try to study — God according to both our religions is impossible; that is, we can only know God imperfectly. This impossibility of the Supreme Godhead qua Brahman qua Shakti compels us to acknowledge the fallibilist nature of what we can say with certainty about God. Intellectual humility demands that we acknowledge the polyphonic and heterogenous nature of theologies and accept that knee jerk pronouncements about paradigm-shifting intellectuals are perhaps uttered in haste and show a loss of distinction between realpolitik and essential theories. Thus, the current Pope is not being liberal when he praises Fr. Gutiérrez; he is being theologically correct. One should not think that Pope Francis is less academically rigorous than his last two predecessors. For instance, Pope Francis has recently urged the Roman confessors to listen more than judge and advice; he has asked them to be less of psychiatrists than conduits of God's unconditional love and mercy. This is not only a Catholic teaching; this is the teaching of countless Hindu holy women and men. This is the conclusion of the French originator of deconstruction; Jacques Derrida. Derrida in a book on forgiveness points out that what can be forgiven is not what really draws out the human quality of forgiveness. That which is humanly unpardonable when pardoned shows truly that the quality of mercy is never strained. Thus, systemic sin and large-scale epistemic injustices demand that we use the best possible strategy at our disposal — and we have no better arsenal except that gifted to us by God through Gustavo Gutiérrez OP.

The Society of Jesus in India has been instrumental not only in changing the educational landscape in our country but by affecting nearly all aspects of our nation. Today the Missionaries of Charity preferentially work for the poor because their Founder was guided by some of the best Jesuits of the Calcutta Province; some of whom I had met as a kid. For instance, the Jesuits Frs. Celeste Van Exem and Lawrence Abello were both deeply sceptical about Fr. Gutiérrez's thoughts,

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but they were humble and intellectually mature enough to not ignore liberation theology. When I met Fr. Van Exem SJ, he was bedridden, and I have written extensively here and in the *Herald* on [Fr. Dr. Abello SJ](#) who was like a grandfather to me; and about how both shaped the spirituality of the Saint of the Gutters. Mother Teresa told me personally and later, [Sr. Nirmala MC](#), who succeeded her, how both priests clearly told both of them about the dangers of liberation theology without sacrificing the main points of Fr. Gutiérrez. Both the Saint and her successor ensured that the poorest of the poor remains at the centre of the apostolic and even the contemplative lives of the four main branches of their Congregation and their respective lay collaborators. Fr. Abello SJ took me to meet Mother Teresa thrice at Mother House. About my experiences with Sr. Nirmala and Sr. Barbara I have written in this website long ago. Sr. Barbara MC was also one of the followers of Mother Teresa. Today [the Christian Brothers](#) and so many other Congregations in India have reoriented themselves because of historical wrongs which became known in the later part of the last century and continue to haunt them — they have all preferentially opted for the poor and are still trying to realign themselves with the charisms of their founders. How are they doing it? In India they are being guided to a considerable extent by Jesuits and these Jesuits are all schooled in liberation theology.

For instance, the Jesuit Journal *Vidyajyoti* and even their *Ignis* and in-house magazine *Jivan* are all now totally aligned with liberation theology's goals and aims. A close reading of the recent editorials of *Vidyajyoti* will show how this influential Journal is reshaping Indian thought today — not only Catholic thought, but even Hindu thought. Through these publications, one cannot but be moved by the Roman Catholic Church's thrust to opt for the poor. I am now convinced that God preferentially resides with the poor, the marginalised and the suffering than with powerful of this earth. God's relaxed time and the consequent relaxed economy are liberating and challenge the Pharaoh's helter-skelter distraught workaholicism fuelled cruel over-consumption. Liberation theology resists the time which pushes young and brilliant Indians to death from overwork. And without Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez's pioneering work this resistance would have been missing from the apostolic work of the Roman Catholic Church in India.

This author is a Shakti Upasak and in the *Herald* [he has recently shown how Vatican II has forced him to recalibrate his life](#) as an initiated follower of Shakti in Her most radical manifestations/representations. He is a worshipper of the Mahavidyas and follows Virachara within Shakta Tantra. It is without any reserve therefore, and without being slightly Roman Catholic about it, I declare to the all women and men of goodwill that perchance it is time that we pay attention to the corpus of Fr. Gutiérrez and rethink his contribution to the realisation of the aims and goals of Vatican II. Vatican II is not the patrimony of the Roman Catholic Church alone; as Tantra is not the patrimony of Hindus alone in India. In India, unlike anywhere else in the world, we believe not in tolerating each other with hostile and repressed anger and suspicion; we indeed know that it is possible to live together without animosity and fanaticism. Everything good on this earth comes from God and as far as Hinduism is concerned, as I have shown elsewhere on this website, [the problem of religious relativism](#) might arise in America, but it does not arise here in India. We have our own distinct forms of Christianity and Hinduism. These distinct Indian characteristics of our respective religions cannot be easily understood by foreigners or even Indians who have been born and brought up in other nations.

The beauty of the works of Fr. Gutiérrez's works is that he never watered down his Church's cherished traditions. He just asked his fellow Catholics and thus, all people of goodwill everywhere to be more faithful to the Marginal Jew who halted the march of the Roman Empire. He was a truer son of Pope John XXIII than many who attended those tensed sessions at Rome which caused many to decry their own Catholic Faith and feed their own egos in the name of tradition. It took a marginal priest to realise Giuseppe Roncalli, the good Pope's vision of a more merciful and just Church which accepts its own flaws and thus make the Church a force against evil by first seeing the mote in its own eye.

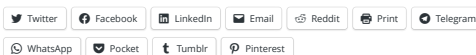
It is because of Fr. Gutiérrez's insights that an insignificant Tantric will think more about the poorest who seek the help of the Mahavidyas at Tarapith's crematorium this week and preferentially ignore the rich of this earth. It is because of this marginal man that a non-Christian, a marginal Hindu for that matter, since Tantra is a much-contested path within Hinduism, has had to take a closer look at the Roman Catholic Church and found it not wanting in the essentials of Hinduism. Otherwise, he would have been miffed at being labelled by one of the greatest conciliar theologians of the last century, Karl Rahner SJ, an 'anonymous Christian'. In short, Gustavo Gutiérrez was far ahead of his times and single handedly did more for the Indian people from Peru and Rome than many Indians whether Catholic or Hindu has ever done for India. Holiness and true scholarship are neither against each other and transcend nations and religions. Haters of all religions are rendered powerless with time and forgotten. Gutiérrez will never be forgotten and will be remembered in India alongside Sri Avinavagupta, Khemraj, Lal Ded and Mirabal. Gutiérrez like all of these Hindus, challenged his own status quo for he found his zeitgeist too stifling and claustrophobic. Poverty is one of the most demeaning conditions that a human being is thrust into — nobody chooses to be belittled by others; nobody wants charity if they ever had another option. Gutiérrez realised that and made us realise this.

Peace, peace, and peace to all of us who seek the Truth for the Truth is One and Sages call it by many names.

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*Subhasis Chattopadhyay Ph.D. is an ex-Sahitya Akademi Judge. His Ph.D. was on theodicy and Patristics in Cormac McCarthy and Stephen King. He has formal qualifications in Biblical Theology and in Formative Spirituality. He has also formally studied the Hindu canon and has separate qualifications in the behavioural sciences. His reviews in Prabuddha Bharata from 2010 to 2021 have often featured in the websites of Ivy League Presses. His works in various fields are much quoted. He writes here, at ESamskriti and the Herald. Dr. Chattopadhyay delivered the de Nobili Endowment Lecture in 2022. He has a First Masters in English from the University of Calcutta and studied at St. Xavier's College when it was not autonomous and topped the university in the poetry paper as an undergraduate student. He is a scholar of Roman Catholicism, but a practising initiated Shakta Tantric who divides his time between Kolkata and Tarapith, a 'Siddhapith' at Birbhum, West Bengal. Some [parts of this essay](#) had been published elsewhere when Fr. Gutiérrez was alive.*

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