



Liberation theology and the Papacy

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Snapshot

- *The article remembers Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI's warnings against Marxism which informs liberation theology.*
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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 censured by Pope John Paul the Great and by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger before he 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.

We will today try to commemorate their memories through their writings in this brief essay.

The dangers of Communism were felt so strongly by Bishop Karol Wojtyla that even before he was elected Pope, when he 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 *Pope 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).

In the meanwhile, in Latin America, there arose a resurgence of Marxist thought fuelled by the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez who belongs to the Order of Preachers or, Dominicans. Fr. Gutiérrez's ideas 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 stronger in Indian and global Catholic churches.

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 has been 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 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.

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 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, 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. It often degrades into a rant against the very fabric of human culture so cherished 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).

If Tian An's intentions were truly liberating, then we would not have bothered with his work in this brief essay. This American citizen, ensconced in American academia oversteps his limits, true to the mirage of America's belief in itself as having the unfortunate manifest destiny to oversee the internal affairs of a sovereign state, that he observes in page 116 of his book about our internal affairs:

"In 2019, Article 370 in India, which granted Jammu and Kashmir special status as autonomous administrative regions, was modified in the midst of a lockdown, Internet blackout, and military occupation that continued into the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the article had prevented Indian citizens from other states from purchasing land or property there. This move angered Pakistan and drew sympathy from the international community, but their present reality remains the same: *an Indian scramble for Kashmiri land ensued.*"

Wong Tian An reduces the abrogation of Article 370 to one of land-grabbing of Jammu and Kashmir by India. Liberation theology and Marxism allows Tian An to declare with a finality that all of India wanted equal rights for fellow Indians, in this case they happen to be Kashmiris because everyone in our country wants a piece of the land-pie that is Kashmir.

Liberation theology sees everything through the lens of the acquisition of property and land transactions. This is in line with classical Marxism which focuses less on cultural capitalism and more on materialist dialectics with an emphasis on the human person being solely dependent on forces shaped by economic pressures.

Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI were not wrong in condemning liberation theology as a very limiting tool in explaining Christianity. Indian Roman Catholics, who are fellow pilgrims, need to be alert that

they do not ignore Papal warnings against liberation theology or play into the hands of academics like Wong Tian An.

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