

Origins of Liberation Theology

Origins of Liberation Theology – Study Notes

1. Historical Context

Period	Key Events & Conditions	Relevance to Liberation Theology
Late 19th – Early 20th?c.	• Rise of Marxist thought in Europe. • Social Darwinism and scientific racism dominate intellectual climate. • Catholic Church confronts modernity (e.g., <i>Rerum?Novarum?</i>1891).	Sets the stage for a critical view of capitalism and a concern for the poor.
1930s?1940s	• Great Depression ? massive unemployment & poverty. • Emergence of Christian social movements (e.g., Catholic Action, Protestant “Social Gospel”). • Decolonization in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.	Demonstrates that faith communities can address systemic injustice.
1950s?1960s	• Cuban Revolution (1959) and other left?wing uprisings. • Vatican II (1962?1965) promotes “aggiornamento” (updating) and a preferential option for the poor.	Provides political and theological openings for a radical re?reading of the Gospel.
1960s?1970s (Latin America)	• Rapid urbanization, land concentration, and rural poverty. • Military dictatorships and state violence. • Emergence of base?community movements (CEBs) and Christian “popular” churches.	Grass?roots experience of oppression fuels a theology that sees salvation as both spiritual and socio?political.

2. Intellectual Roots

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Source	Core Idea	Influence on Liberation Theology
Karl Marx	Class struggle as engine of history; critique of capitalism.	Provides analytical tools for diagnosing structural injustice.
Friedrich Engels	Material conditions shape consciousness.	Encourages focus on concrete lived realities of the poor.
Gustavo Gutiérrez (Peruvian priest)	"Theology of the people's liberation" – Gospel read from the perspective of the oppressed.	Publishes <i>A Theology of Liberation</i> (1971), often considered the movement's manifesto.
Jesuit <i>Preferential Option for the Poor</i>	Biblical mandate to stand with the marginalized.	Becomes a central theological principle.
Vatican II Documents		
• <i>Gaudium et Spes</i> (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)	Church must engage the world, promote human dignity, and act as "sign of the times."	Legitimizes a socially engaged theology.
• <i>Lumen Gentium</i> (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church)		
Latin American Base Communities (Comunidades Eclesiales de Base)	Small, lay-led groups reading Scripture together, linking faith to daily struggle.	Provide the practical laboratory for liberation praxis.

3. Key Figures & Milestones

Figure	Contribution	Notable Work
Gustavo Gutiérrez	Father of liberation theology; coined the term "liberation theology."	<i>A Theology of Liberation</i> (1971)
Jon Sobrino	Developed "theology of the people" and emphasized Christ's solidarity with the poor.	<i>Christology at the Crossroads</i> (1978)
Leonardo Boff	Brazilian theologian; linked ecological concerns with liberation (eco-theology).	<i>Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor</i> (1995)
**Pedro Casaldáliga		