

An analysis and critical evaluation of Gutiérrez's conception of "God as Liberator" (with special reference to *A Theology of Liberation*)

Rightly considered by many to be the 'founding father' of liberation theology,¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez has had a profound influence on how theology is practised around the world, especially in Latin America but also in 'the West'. Gutiérrez's seminal work, *A Theology of Liberation*, was published in 1971 and has ever since been provoking both heated debate and meaningful reflection on how we 'do' theology and how we live it out. This essay examines one crucial aspect of Gutiérrez's work, namely, his understanding of God as "Liberator" – an appellation that is a provocative theological statement, a powerful metaphor and an historical assertion all in one. Section I introduces Gutiérrez's concept of God as Liberator, locating it at the very centre of liberation theology. Section II analyses the term as metaphor, history and theology, and Section III critically evaluates it. Section IV concludes by relating this particular issue to more general debate about the contextualisation of theology.

Section I

Gustavo Gutiérrez was born in Peru in 1928, the son of a poor urban worker and an uneducated mother. He studied theology in Belgium and France throughout the 1950s, influenced by the writings of Metz, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Mounier and Lebreton, before being ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1959. After further studies in Italy, Gutiérrez returned to Peru to teach at the Catholic Pontifical University in Lima.² It was in Lima that Gutiérrez became acutely aware of the difference between Western classical theology and the realities of common life in Peru, especially as experienced by its poor and marginalized. A praxiological process of pastoral experience and deep theological reflection further developed Gutiérrez's theology and resulted in his seminal work, *A Theology of Liberation (Teología de la liberación: Perspectivas)* in 1971. Introducing 1988's revised edition, Gutiérrez poignantly describes his book as "a love letter to God, to the church, and to the people to which I belong" (1988, xlvi).

The notion of God as Liberator pervades this masterpiece – and indeed all of Gutiérrez's work, whether he be writing about creation, the Exodus, communion, the Beatitudes, Isaiah, salvation, justice or the nature of God. God as Liberator is, as Chopp observes (1986, 18), the "founding metaphor" of liberation theology and is central to it, whilst informing its other symbols and aspects. Beyond operating as a metaphor, 'God as Liberator' is a theological construct: "The Creator of the world is the Creator and Liberator of Israel," says Gutiérrez (1974, 88) and who later explains the universality of that liberation. This theological construct is rooted in a particular understanding of history: "The God of Exodus is the God of history and of political liberation... Yahweh is the Liberator, the *goel* of Israel" (1974, 89). Aside from this understanding of God (the Father) as Liberator, Gutiérrez also identifies Jesus Christ as "the Lord of history, the liberator of the oppressed" (1974, 120). Although this essay predominantly considers God the Father as Liberator, we will also briefly reflect on God the Son as Liberator, since the two concepts are obviously related.

¹ Liberation theology has been considered one of the most significant developments within Christian theology in the last century (Rowland 1999, xiii), and its practitioners understand it not as a *branch* of theology, but something more essential: a new way of 'doing theology.' This method is "an attempt to look at the world in terms of involvement with the underprivileged and oppressed, and to find within the Christian gospel both the analytical tools and the energizing power to work for radical change in that world" (Anderson and Stransky 1979, 4). Its immediate causes can be traced to developments within Roman Catholicism in Latin America in the 1960s, combined with glaring economic and social inequalities and widespread feelings of injustice there. From 1968 onwards, a movement emerged, seeking to bring about liberation from poverty, injustice and sin, built on the theology and social analysis of Gutiérrez, along with Boff, Segundo and Sobrino. This movement was characterised by belief in a divine preference for the poor and their liberation; the need to analyse social problems contextually; the need to work within a historical and systemic framework; and a conviction that theology must be practical – by being based on experience, and having an ultimate impact on society.

² Taylor (1996, 189ff) gives a much fuller description of Gutiérrez's life and career, and himself cites Robert McAfee Brown's appreciative introduction to this influential theologian: *Gustavo Gutiérrez: An Introduction to Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990).

For Gutiérrez, the concept that God should be understood as Liberator is a foundational one. In a later work, *The God of Life*, he explains how this is an ontological truth, in that “God is not a liberator because God liberates; rather God liberates because God is a liberator... I am not playing with words here, but trying to bring out the primacy and transcendence of God and to remind ourselves that God’s being gives meaning to God’s action” (1991a, 2). This is not to assert that we cannot know God through his actions – Gutiérrez himself says “[i]t is certain that we know the Lord through the Lord’s works” (1991b, 96) – but rather that those actions reveal a prior truth. Thus, to follow Gutiérrez’s argument, we must start from the belief that God is a liberator by his very nature; it is a secondary (though still fundamental) point that God takes action to liberate.

Section II

In this section, we look at how Gutiérrez’s conception of God as Liberator can be understood as operating in three interrelated dimensions (see Figure 1). The concept is explored as theology, as an interpretation of history and, first, as metaphor.

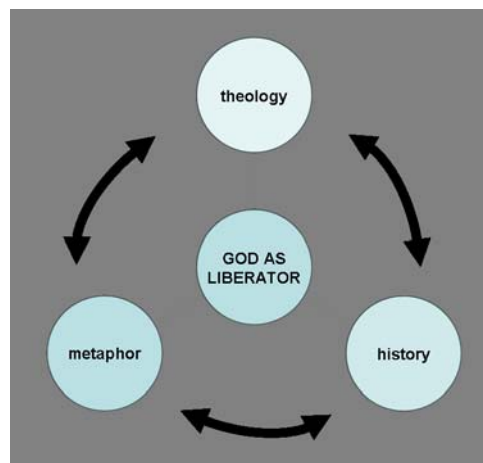


Figure 1. The three dimensions of Gutiérrez’s ‘God as Liberator’

(a) “Liberator” as Metaphor

On the most basic level, ‘God as Liberator’ can be understood metaphorically. That is, it provides a symbol or image through which we can understand a greater truth. The Bible contains a great stock of images through which God can, partially at least, be understood. Such imagery is essential because a direct understanding of God is impossible for man: “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts’” (Isaiah 55:8-9, NIV). Thus we have only a partial understanding of an ineffable God in the biblical images of Him as shepherd, father, king, potter, vineyard-keeper and so forth.³

Gutiérrez uses the metaphor of God as Liberator, and interprets the Old Testament – indeed, the Bible in its entirety – as having this as its greatest image. It is difficult to assess the actual significance attached to this term in Scripture, which is typically translated “redeemer” in English Bibles (note that the NIV, for example, contains neither “liberator” nor “liberate”, and just one instance of “liberated,” in Romans 8:21).⁴ Gutiérrez works with an existing metaphor

³ There is an interesting discussion to be had as to whether biblical metaphors, like those listed here, are more valid than modern and recently created metaphors (or, indeed, whether the latter are valid at all), given that the former exist in divinely-inspired Scripture.

⁴ Likewise, it is difficult to weigh the significance of Gutiérrez’s choice of ‘Liberator’, given that he himself wrote in Spanish and that his works come to us translated (in the case of *A Theology of Liberation*, by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson).

– that of redeemer (Hebrew לָאָה, *gō'ēl*⁵) and adapts it to fit his own socio-political situation. He is able to do this because, for him, “theology seeks to provide a language for speaking about God” and starts from a prior “Christian praxis” (1988, xxxiv) – in other words, our discourse must be shaped first by our experience of God and the world; this is liberation theology’s ‘priority of praxis.’

(b) “Liberator” as History

The second of the three dimensions we may see in Gutiérrez’s understanding of God as Liberator is the historical dimension. That is to say, the historically-enacted liberating presence of God in human history, which informs our theology and helps shape our metaphors of God.

The focus of Gutiérrez’s biblical theology is a series of key themes or, more specifically, the events that underlie these themes. Above all, God is “[t]he God of Exodus... Yahweh is the Liberator, the *goel* of Israel” (1974, 89). Thus, Gutiérrez’s conception is not mere abstraction; it is an understanding of God that is rooted historically. Moreover, human history must be understood as an ongoing reality and, therefore, the “Exodus experience is paradigmatic. It remains vital and contemporary due to similar historical experiences which the People of God undergo” (1974, 90). Although God was known to the Israelites before the Exodus, Gutiérrez (1991a, 4) asserts that “[t]his is the deed on which the faith of Israel is founded,” and hence liberation “gives meaning to the entire journey that leads the people to encounter with God.”⁶

Other historical aspects of the Judaeo-Christian tradition are likewise understood in terms of liberation, such as the (return from) exile, the message of the prophets, and the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. In his interpretation of Mary’s Song (Luke 1:46-55), for example, Gutiérrez (1991a, 180) says that in her eyes, God “is with us [and]... will become the liberator of Israel,” referring to the messianic coming of Christ. In *A Theology of Liberation*, this theme is explicit, with Christ’s death and resurrection being a “gift of radical liberation” (1974, 103). The relationship between mankind and God, therefore, is to be understood liberatively: “[t]his is the meaning of Yahweh’s interventions in history. The purpose of his activity is not to demonstrate his power, but to liberate, and make justice reign” (1983, 7). This purpose endures, and today Christians meet “the liberator of the oppressed” as they “explicitly confess Christ to be the Lord of history” through celebrating communion together (1974, 120).

(c) “Liberator” as Theology

The most important dimension of Gutiérrez’s understanding of God as Liberator is the theological one, although this is strongly informed both by its metaphorical and historical dimensions.

According to Gutiérrez, liberation theology “had its origin in the contrast between the urgent task of proclaiming the life of the risen Jesus and the conditions in which the poor of Latin America were living” (1988, xxxiv). This statement recognises that theology – as the product of human theologians located in a certain time and space – is always contextualised. It will inevitably be shaped by that context. Here specifically, the “historical process in which Latin America has been involved, and the experiences of many Christians in this process, led liberation theology to speak of salvation in Christ in terms of liberation” (1988, xxxvii). Coupled with the historical (Exodic and Exilic) dimension discussed above, we can see Gutiérrez’s theology in sum: the people of God stand in a tradition where He has rescued them from oppression and injustice; and where He offers liberation from sin and fallenness. Gutiérrez’s ‘liberation’ is, therefore, both worldly and other-worldly; both social and spiritual. It

⁵ From the root לָאָה, *gā'al*, meaning to “redeem, avenge, revenge, ransom, do the part of a kinsman” (Harris 1980, 144), a word found 104 times in 17 books of the Old Testament.

⁶ In a memorable turn of phrase, Enrique Dussel in Van Iersel and Weiler stresses that Exodus continues to be paradigmatic and that “[o]ppression, dictatorships, exploitation without hope, form a *Latin American Egypt*” today (1987, 88, emphasis his). A similar belief led David Tracy (ibid., 119) to conclude “Christianity is most itself when it is an Exodus religion.”

is all-encompassing, and always has its roots in God the Father: “Yahweh must ultimately be the Liberator of human existence in totality,” he concludes (1983, 11).

Characteristic of liberation theology is the point which follows: that liberation is what today might be described as ‘kingdom work’ and, as such, is an ongoing function of the Church. This is characteristic because the Christian community is here called upon to act justly, to resist oppression and to take social action, rather than experiencing faith as merely a belief or knowledge system. This is surely the reasoning behind Gutiérrez’s claim that “[t]o know God as liberator *is* to liberate, *is* to do justice” (1983, 8, emphasis his). Christianity must effect transformation, yet a “poorly understood spiritualization has often made us forget the human consequences of the eschatological promises and the power to transform unjust social structures which they imply” (1974, 97).

We have identified three dimensions of Gutiérrez’s understanding of God as Liberator, although this analysis of them has been necessarily brief. In the following section we engage with, and critically evaluate, that conception.

Section III

Inevitably, some criticisms we may make of Gutiérrez’s ‘God as Liberator’ concept will be true of his theology in general; and criticisms of his theology may also hold for the wider body of work that constitutes liberation theology. Ever since *A Theology of Liberation* was published, there has been renewed debate about how theology is done (both written and practised); how it is contextualised; and how transformative it ought to be. It would be a fair assessment to say that Gutiérrez has managed to ruffle a good few feathers in his time. In this essay, we put on hold some of the broader methodological and sociological criticisms of his work, as well as some of the more general theological ones, to focus particularly on those criticisms that relate directly to his conception of God as Liberator.

(a) Evaluating “Liberator” as Metaphor

Firstly, then, is the question of how adequate a metaphor is ‘God as *Liberator*’? A metaphor can be a valuable way of understanding the part of God’s character that He has revealed to us. Yet it is generally recognised that a metaphor should not veer toward the extreme of relating God too closely to the world He has created, nor toward the opposite extreme of merely describing God tautologically. Seeing God as the redemptive Liberator of His people is indeed a powerful metaphor that avoids those twin pitfalls. Yet we may question its qualification as the *central* and *primary* metaphor of our theology, as insisted by Gutiérrez.

The Hebrew root *ga'al* is interpreted differently in different biblical contexts (which include avenge, ransom and redemption but also purchasing and kinsman-redeemer) yet only appears in the sense of *divine redeemer* in the books of Job (once), Psalms (twice), Proverbs (once), Isaiah (13 times) and Jeremiah (once). Even liberation theologians’ beloved Exodus only contains the related verb *redeem* twice (Exodus 6:6, 15:13). This scarcity must call into question how central a metaphor it can be. Whilst frequency must not be the *only* criterion in assessing the significance of the term, it is surely a crucial one. We may conclude that, whilst God as Liberator is a helpful metaphor – especially in relation to Gutiérrez’s Latin American context – there are doubts over whether it is the *central* metaphor of the Bible; surely there is scope for the inclusion of other (equally powerful) metaphors within Latin American theology.⁷

⁷ Johnstone (1990, 68) refers to Martin Noth’s theory that there are at least five themes or images within the Old Testament (specifically, for Noth, in the Pentateuch), namely: (i) the patriarchs, (ii) the exodus, (iii) the wilderness, (iv) Sinai and the law, and (v) settlement. We may wish to add metaphors such as God the King, God the Judge and God the Father, biblical metaphors that speak deeply of God’s character (notwithstanding recent criticisms by feminist theologians).

(b) Evaluating “Liberator” as History

Secondly, what are we to make of Gutiérrez’s historical understanding of God as Liberator? This is a very interesting question, and one which deserves considerable attention. It has long been a criticism of Gutiérrez’s biblical theology that he focuses on certain books of the Bible and says little or nothing about others. Given that these books are products of specific historical situations, by implication he overlooks certain periods of Judaeo-Christian history. This is important because, in Gutiérrez’s own understanding, human history is an arena in which God intervenes (e.g. to liberate and work towards justice). A selective reading of the historical record may indeed find clear instances of such divine liberative intervention in history but may do so at the cost of ignoring other periods of history, other books of the Bible and other theological themes. Among these may be the story of creation⁸ and Pentecost and the growth of the early church – both downplayed within Gutiérrez’s work.⁹ It is undeniable that the Exodus clearly demonstrates God at work as Liberator (both directly, and indirectly through Moses) but our concern must be whether, looking at human history in its entirety, this is indeed the sole (or even the major) focal point from which our interpretation of history emanates.

(c) Evaluating “Liberator” as Theology

Thirdly, what may be said about the theological dimension of Gutiérrez’s concept of God as Liberator, when we (somewhat artificially) separate this from the metaphorical and historical dimensions?

Gutiérrez’s theological understanding of God as Liberator is profound. It is a judicious term to use, speaking of divine involvement, divine justice, divine love and divine mercy. It provokes not just the question ‘liberation from what?’ but also ‘liberation to what?’ The Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt – to a land they were promised would be “flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8). It is a helpful theology which points both to our fallenness and captivity but also to our hope and freedom. It is also helpful because it suggests the social dimension of the human predicament compared to, say, today’s evangelical preference for the term ‘Saviour’, which seems to have intensely personal overtones. As suggested in Section II above, it is also an appropriate term because it leads to a theology that comprehensively covers all of human existence, with its emphasis on liberation from material oppression as well as the oppression of sin.

However, some aspects of this theological term are not necessarily helpful. Focussing on God as Liberator may lead to an inadequate understanding of, say, God as lawgiver (so North 1987, 36ff) or God as creator (which must, by definition, be a prior understanding of God than that of liberator). Assuming that all theology must flow through this concept, as Gutiérrez seems to suggest, is to dangerously reduce our perspective of God to one particular viewpoint (valid and significant though that viewpoint may be). It is difficult to see, for example, how the totality of Jesus’ death on the cross can be understood merely from the perspective of liberation – may it not also be understood as sacrifice, as victory, as substitution, as atonement?

In presenting the notion of God as Liberator, Gutiérrez deliberately focuses on God the Father. His writing about “Christ the Liberator” is in some ways constrained by the Exodic language and framework he has established. Some of the claims he makes about Christ the Liberator are contentious, if not demonstrably wrong, and only a minority of commentators today believe that Jesus, son of the carpenter/joiner Joseph was “born into a social milieu characterised by poverty” (1983, 13).¹⁰ This appears to be one of many instances where

⁸ Whilst Gutiérrez *does* refer to creation, its significance is always relegated below that of the Exodus. This is clearly demonstrated in his discussion of Israelite thought after the Babylonian captivity, which he summarises thus: “...this God of Liberation is so powerful, he must also be the creator of all things” (1983, 11) and, elsewhere, “The God of Exodus is the God of history and of political liberation more than the God of nature” (1974, 89).

⁹ Further, what can we conclude theologically about times in history when there is *no evidence* of God intervening?

¹⁰ For example, John Schneider in Clapp (1998, 145) argues that Jesus was neither born into the richest nor poorest class, and Blomberg (1999, 106) says that Joseph and Mary were probably “lower middle class.”

Gutiérrez starts from his own particular viewpoint and can be seen reading it into the texts he relies upon.¹¹ Indeed, he is somewhat selective about which passages of Scripture are relevant and, while there is some truth in Gutiérrez's claim that Jesus "chose to live with the poor" (ibid.), we know that he also socialised with the rich (e.g. Luke 19:1-10). Gutiérrez's Jesus as Liberator looks too much like liberation theology's ideal political and revolutionary leader to ring true.¹² Likewise, Gutiérrez's church looks too much like the conscientized proletariat: "[t]rue liberation will be the work of the oppressed themselves" (1974, 120).

We may also raise some concerns about Gutiérrez's treatment of the book of Exodus, from whence his liberative paradigm springs. Aside from the historical concerns above, we must ask what the *theological significance* of the Exodus event was. Ashby convincingly contends that, although it is correct to see the Exodus as a liberating act of justice, "[i]t was first and foremost an *act of God*, concerned with his proper glory and revelation of himself" (1998, 34, emphasis his). The Exodus was to be a declaration of God's universal sovereignty and, in Fretheim's phrase (1991, 19-20), was a 'cosmic victory' against other gods. Fretheim concludes that the book of Exodus needs to be understood not in terms of liberation but in light of 'creation theology.' This is a persuasive point, especially since, as Fretheim points out, God's stated objective of the Exodus doesn't refer to the Israelites but rather that "[t]he Egyptians will know that I am the Lord" (Exodus 14:18). It would appear, therefore, that Gutiérrez's understanding of God as Liberator stems from an incomplete or improper theological interpretation of Exodus; it is less of a political manifesto than he supposes.¹³

Section IV

By way of a summary, we come onto an appreciation of how Gutiérrez's term is a contextualised one: it speaks into, and about, his situation. As Cadorette (1988, 115) describes, "Gutiérrez's theology is a mixture of feeling and analysis guided by a vision of what it means to be a Christian in a world sadly characterized by systemic oppression. It is a theology of experience, his own and that of the poor, along a long and sinuous road towards liberation."

In a sense, good theology – which, as we have seen, Gutiérrez regards as a "language for speaking about God" (1988, xxxiv) – will be relevant to its context, and will inevitably be a product of it. In this regard, Gutiérrez (1974, xxxv) is right to say that different "dialects" are valid within that language. However, there are clear dangers of mistaking *our* view of God with humanity's *total* view of God, or even *God's* view of *us*. So, whilst it is entirely natural for Gutiérrez to conceptualise God as Liberator, we should not automatically expect the same theology, historical understanding or metaphor to be applicable in other cultures, or at other times.

It is possible to trace the modern understanding of God as Liberator to the 1960s, when a post-war generation increasingly rejected images of God which seemed to justify control or oppression; traditional metaphors of God such as king or warrior no longer resonated culturally. We may perhaps learn a lesson here, namely that failure to consider the full range of biblical images of God can lead to an imbalance or inadequacy in our understanding of God. This was true in the 1960s, when the concept of God as Liberator spoke strongly to

¹¹ On Gutiérrez's approach to Exodus in particular, commentator Godfrey Ashby dismissively concludes it "looks suspiciously like the foisting of an international socialist movement onto a bygone age" (1998, 34).

¹² As Pope John Paul II civilly objected, "this idea of Christ as a political figure, a revolutionary, as the subversive man from Nazareth, does not tally with the Church's catechesis," cited by Hebblethwaite in Rowland (1999, 183). As an interesting aside, Rob Lacey's retelling of Jesus' life was published in March 2006 as *The Liberator*, perhaps indicating that there is *some* contemporary resonance in this characterization: the book was voted Book of the Year at the Christian Booksellers Convention and Borders' Best Religious Book.

¹³ In discussing the work of several liberation theologians – including Gutiérrez – Kirk (1979, 95) makes a highly significant observation, that "[n]one of our authors has undertaken an exegetical study of the passages, in the accepted sense of the world. Most of them are aware of, and draw upon, some of the results of contemporary exegetical studies. However, they use them more as an interpretative 'launching pad' than as a conscious creative tool. As a result, most of them make no attempt to verify exegetically the correctness of either their method or their use of the text."

Gutiérrez and similar theologians, but in substituting one biased view for another, we are still in danger in limiting our theological understanding unnecessarily.

However, these reservations are those of a Western theology student, much removed from the poverty and oppression confronted by Gutiérrez in Latin America. In introducing and advocating an understanding of God as Liberator, Gutiérrez has, ultimately, added to our appreciation of God and His works in the world and – perhaps more importantly – has created a flawed but still instructive theology, paradigm and metaphor that speaks of hope and justice, both in this world and the world to come.¹⁴

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¹⁴ A fair assessment of Gutiérrez's theology should recognise that, as Cadorette explains, it has "a single purpose – to give vitality and purpose to Christians committed to the cause of liberation" (1988, 128). This purpose is utterly admirable, but in the last analysis we must consider the process by which that purpose is attempted.

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