

LIBERATION THEOLOGY

The Liberation Theology is a radical Christian movement based on a new school of Christian theology that projects Jesus Christ as not only the Redeemer but also as the Liberator of the oppressed. This movement, originated first in Latin American countries, emphasises the role of church in bringing justice to the poor and oppressed through political activism in the form of radical action group movement.

Liberation Theology explores the relationship between the Christian Theology and political activism especially in areas like social justice, poverty and human rights. It emphasises the clergymen's responsibilities to the deprived sections of people and stresses the need for seeing the world from the view point of the economically poor and oppressed.

Brief History of Origin:

There was a growing feeling of frustration and anger among the clergymen working in Latin American countries in the post 1950 era because of their bitter realisation that most people amongst whom they worked lived in abject poverty and the church was not doing anything to satisfy their material needs. They had this awkward feeling that it was most improper and cruel to preach the message of gospel to such under-privileged sections of people while ignoring their needs for food, shelter and human dignity. They felt that since Jesus had always shown his utmost love and compassion for the poor and suffering masses in the world, the church should also initiate steps for ensuring justice to the poor and oppressed sections of people in the world. They were disgusted and frustrated by the existing gross inequalities and widening disparities among the people, especially in the third world countries and attributed the responsibility for creating such an unequal world to the exploitative policies of the imperialist countries.

By 1960 a strong wind of Christian radicalism had engulfed the entire Latin American region and more and more church activists had started coming forward declaring their commitment to work among the poor. With the support of these activists many radical groups of students, workers, farmers, etc. had also emerged in countries like Peru, Bolivia and Argentina seeking a new approach to the problems of the poor and downtrodden. Constant pressure from such radical groups and individuals seeking official sanction to get involved in political activism to resolve the problems of the poor had prompted some senior church leaders affiliated to Latin American Episcopal Conference to put up a strong argument in Second Vatican Council held in Rome from 1962 to 1965 to allow the clergymen to get involved themselves in organising people's movements to fight for the rights of marginalised sections of people especially in the third world countries. Approving this proposal the Second Vatican Council had expressed grave concern over the growing disparity between rich and poor countries of the world and had proclaimed a preferential option for the poor allowing the church activists to work among the oppressed classes of people and empower them to fight for their rights. Encouraged by the new stance of the Vatican council towards Christian radicalism many leftist theologians in Latin American countries started openly participating in an action group movement associating themselves with the survival struggles of the poor and the downtrodden. The term Liberation Theology for this movement was first used by the Peruvian Priest Gustavo Gutierrez just before the Medellin Conference of Latin American Bishops in 1968. The Medellin Conference in which Gustavo Gutierrez had played a prominent role had strongly denounced the extreme inequalities existing between different classes/sections of people and the unjust use of power and exploitation of the poor by the oppressive classes. In 1971 Gustavo Gutierrez authored a book titled 'Theology of Liberation' which is considered as a code book of action by the followers of the new movement. The Liberation Theology movement spread to many African and Asian countries also by 1970.

This new radical, social and Christian movement is rooted in Christian faith and scriptures.

The leaders of this movement however were convinced that the traditional theology with its abstract concepts failed to uphold the original spirit of the gospel message and has become irrelevant to the suffering masses in the third world. They felt that the Christian theologians should not remain as mere theoreticians and instead play a pro-active role to engage themselves in struggles to bring about a transformation in the society. Thus according to this new school of thought the focus of the movement should be shifted from mere belief in Christianity to its relevance to the people's struggle for a just world. Gustavo Gutierrez asserts that the theology should involve revolutionary action on behalf of the poor and oppressed and the theologian must therefore be immersed in the struggle for transforming the society through liberation of the oppressed. It is the firm view of the liberation theologians that the capitalist nations have always oppressed and exploited the poorer nations and they have become prosperous at the expense of the impoverished nations. As per this "dependence theory" the development and progress of rich countries depends on the underdevelopment of poor countries. Elaborating the mechanism of this exploitation which has contributed to the underdevelopment of the third world countries, they point out that the process of development undertaken by the capitalist countries was organised in such a way that it created an unequal world with all benefits going to the already developed western countries and all the disadvantages going to the historically backward underdeveloped countries. The liberation of the people of the underdeveloped and developing countries on the the periphery from their dependence on the western world at the centre is the main goal of the liberation theology. The liberation theologians do not consider the use of violence as sinful if it is used to attain this goal.

Marxism has exerted a profound influence on Liberation Theologians who blended Catholic teachings with Marxist economic philosophy for a theoretical basis for their professed preferential option for the poor. Marx believed that all the problems that have cropped up in today's world are the direct result of the class exploitation of economically under-privileged sections of people by the rich and powerful. Like Marx, the Liberation Theology also portrayed capitalism as the chief culprit that gave rise to class differences and exploitation of vast sections of the people. Both Marxism and Liberation Theology condemned the religion for supporting the prevailing unequal social structure and legitimating the power of the oppressor. But unlike Marx the liberation theologians retained their faith in Jesus Christ. Their interest in adopting Marxist methodology was limited to the objective of conducting a Marxist style class analysis of the cultural divide between the oppressors and oppressed and to identify the injustices and exploitation within the society. They strongly believed that for the ultimate liberation of the poor and marginalised sections of people from their miseries and deprivation it was necessary for them to keep their faith in the message of gospel and follow the path shown by Jesus Christ. This point however needs some clarification as there is some confusion about the definition of the term liberation and the actual role and use of Marxist methodology in achieving the goals of liberation theology. The liberation theologians use Marxist line of action as a tool for organising people's movements and emancipating the poor and oppressed sections of people from their poverty and bondage, but that does not qualify them to be called liberated. For the Christians among them, true liberation comes only when they reassert their faith in Jesus Christ and lead their life as true Christians. In case of non-Christians, they become truly liberated only when they leave their sinful ways, read other religious practices, and accept Jesus Christ as their saviour. Thus when it comes to commitment to Christian faith there is not much difference between liberation theologians and conservative church activists.

According to liberation theologians, the strength of their movement lies in its compassion for the poor and its conviction that a true Christian should not remain passive and indifferent to the plight of the poor. They point out that the God is not impassive as he is dynamically involved on behalf of the poor and downtrodden. They further point out that since God stands against oppression and exploitation, those who follow him must also do the same. The church's mission thus should always be to protest against oppression and exploitation. Those who follow the Christ should always

challenge whatever is inhuman in the society and side with the poor and oppressed. This new doctrine of the church envisages setting up of numerous base communities which should emerge as an effective forum for social action to organise workers and peasants to fight for their rights and promote their own social welfare.

The liberation theologians all over the world have been using the revolutionary teaching methods propagated by the Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire to promote literacy in general and adult education in particular among the poor and illiterate masses. This method of teaching involved a direct dialogue with the subjects and sensitising them about the social environment and circumstances which kept them under a state of subservience for a long period of time and empowering them to fight back against the oppressive forces for their liberation.

The much needed land reforms has been a subject of priority for liberation theology activists for organising people's movements because of the realisation that in almost all third world countries most of the fertile land was owned by a minority of wealthy land owners while the vast majority of people remained landless. They knew the connection between land ownership and poverty and believed that land ownership will help to eradicate poverty of the rural poor to a great extent.

The liberation theology movement also encouraged formation of human rights advocacy organisations, self-help ventures, peasant co-operatives and struggles for the rights of workers, farmers, fishermen and forest dwellers.

The liberation theology movement started basically as a Catholic action movement. However some protestant groups had also launched a similar movement with limited success. There were also regular interaction meetings between catholic theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, Segundo Galilea and Lucio Gera and protestant leaders like Emilio Castro, Julio de Santa Ana and Rubem Alves on topics like faith and poverty and gospel and social justice. The first Catholic congress devoted to liberation theology was held in Bogoto in March, 1970. The protestant theologians also held their first conference in the same year in Buenos Aires.

There was however mounting resentment among the conservative hardliners in the church hierarchy against the growing Marxist radicalism of the new movement and its tendency to undermine the authority of the church. Since 1983 senior church leaders have been openly criticising liberation theology leaders like Gustavo Gutierrez of Peru and Prof. Jon Sobrino of El Salvador for misguiding the people with their liberation theology notions. On Sept 3, 1984 the congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CPDF), The church's advisory board on doctrinal themes published a directive dated Aug 6 rejecting the Liberation Theology in principle. The directive had the approval of John Paul II. The church leaders criticised the Liberation Theology mainly for the use of marxist analysis and other theories which will ultimately defeat the cause of the poor and also for questioning the church's hierarchy and authority lines. Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez's argument against such criticism has been that the Christian response to oppression should go beyond traditional charity and find out how certain systems kept the majority of people in a state of poverty and address the need to restructure those systems.

Thus it can be seen that the Liberation Theology movement no longer enjoys the trust and support of the Vatican. The "Opus Dei" the conservative and militant wing of the Vatican and also the Central Intelligence Agency of the USA are also reported to be opposed to the Liberation Theology movement because of its defiance of the church leadership and its open support for Marxist philosophy and line of action. Some Christian Action Groups admittedly inspired by Liberation Theology movement of Latin America had sprung up in India also in the seventies with the avowed objective of empowering and liberating the rural poor. However unlike the action groups in Latin America, the leaders of Indian Christian action groups continue to be directly or indirectly linked with church leaders and institutions. These groups were also found receiving financial aid from pro-American Christian funding agencies and some American Foundations. These action groups

working in tandem with other social action groups were also found having close links with some anti-national elements associated with left extremist and secessionist movements in India and as such cannot be considered as genuine Christian Action Groups inspired and guided solely by the Liberation Theology concept.

There are strong grounds to believe that leftist Christian activists in India like Pradip Prabhu, Nicky Chordozo, George Ninan and Fr. Thomas Kocheri who claim to be inspired by the liberation theology and also those liberation theology activists directly associated with CPI (Maoist) and other naxal outfits are only using the liberation theology as a cover to indulge in militant action movements and incite fissiparous tendencies in the country by promoting naxal violence, dalit militancy, caste conflicts and all other militant anti-national movements as part of a larger conspiracy to destabilise India.

There were however some genuine liberation theologians in India like late Sebastin Kappan and Samuel Rihan. However they were never involved in any action group movement and their activities were confined to writing and preaching in support of Liberation Theology.