CHAPTER 3

NATIVE AMERICANS AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THIRD WORLD THEOLOGICAL MOVEMENTS

The advent of theologies of liberation, [1] which are characterized by thoroughgoing social analysis and a radical call for solidarity with the poor, has brought new light to the persistent reality of Third World poverty and deprivation. Faced with many of the same conditions characteristic of the Third World--malnutrition, illiteracy, unemployment, and inadequate health care--Native Americans also experience the need for liberation from oppressive social structures. They find themselves in a prolonged state of political, economic, cultural, religious, and racial limbo; Indian tribes constitute what Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall termed, in 1831, "domestic dependent nations." [2] Native Americans survive as a living witness to the oppressed/oppressor relationship existing even within the geographical boundaries of the First World.

---

1. The term "liberation theology" will also be used, in a general and inclusive sense, to refer to these Third World theological movements.

2. "Cherokee Nation v. Georgia" in Francis Paul Prucha (ed.), Documents of United States Indian Policy (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 59.

The liberation of oppressed peoples, in the Third World and elsewhere, is rightfully pursued through a variety of strategies, including religious activism. Among Native Americans there is certainly ample precedent for religious renewal as political resistance, the Ghost Dance religion and the Native American (Peyote) Church being just two examples.

> In the struggle of the American Indian against the white invaders, religion played a far more significant role than is commonly believed . . . . Frequently it was a religious drive which inspired and sustained their desperate efforts to rise up against the foreigners who had taken their land. [3]

Given this legacy and the fact that many Native Americans have adopted (and adapted to) the Christian faith, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Native Americans have much to gain from and to contribute to the liberation theology movement.

NATIVE AMERICANS AND THE THIRD WORLD

Representing the diversity of theological movements in the world, exclusive of the dominant white male theology of Europe and North America, is the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. EATWOT was organized in 1976 to provide "an independent ecumenical forum for dialogue, challenge, and mutual enrichment among Third World theolo-

---

3. Vittorio Lanternari, The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 63.

gians," [4] and soon thereafter also incorporated the involvement of women and minorities from the First World. Those involved in EATWOT act on the premise that

> the signs of the times are calling for a "theology from the oppressed," not secluded from the struggles of the people. It is the irruption of the oppressed and of the poor that constitutes an exciting challenge to committed Christians, to theology, and to everything else. [5]

But a key element of this new understanding has been the contextualization of theology, so that the shape of a "theology from the oppressed" is a function of the identity of those doing the theologizing. Each particular contextual perspective is a unique contribution in the theological spectrum.

Participants in this worldwide movement theologize from Latin American, African, South African, Asian, Black American, Feminist, and other perspectives. Native Americans are confronted by many of the same issues facing these theologians, and can identify with the concerns they bring to their theological efforts. For example, Native American Christians can draw clear parallels between their own situation and the circumstances facing Black American theologians, who are

> searching for a perspective on Christian theology that [will] help African-Americans recognize that the gospel

---

4. New Dehli, August 1981, "Proposal for the Future of EATWOT," as quoted by Emilio J. M. de Carvalho in Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (eds.), Doing Theology in a Divided World (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), 5.

5. Ibid., 7.

> of Jesus is consistent with their fight for liberation . . . . [6]

When James Cone says that "there can be no black theology which does not take seriously the black experience--a life of humiliation and suffering," [7] and that "the black experience is existence in a system of white racism," [8] Native Americans can offer testimony which only strengthens these indictments.

But to examine each liberation theology movement would require a study beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, we can select one particular "school" of liberation theology as a sort of case study. Latin American liberation theology is an appropriate choice in light of the fact that Vine Deloria, Jr., a Native American scholar with both theological (M.Th.) and legal (J.D.) degrees, has specifically critiqued this movement.

Of course, it is clear that a wholesale appropriation by Native Americans of Latin American liberation theology will not suffice. The most obvious barrier to such an effort is the fact that the Latin American theologians assume a basic consensus of faith that does not exist among Native Americans. The missionary endeavors of diverse Catholic, Orthodox, and particularly Protestant--from Quaker

---

6. James H. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 2d ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), xiii-xiv.

7. Ibid., 23.

8. Ibid., 24.

to Baptist to Lutheran--groups have left Native American Christianity as variegated as it is for the rest of the U.S. And as we look more closely, we will discover that more than just religious distinctives mark the difference between Latin American and Native American situations.

Vine Deloria, Jr., on Liberation Theology

Given that very few Native American theologians or scholars have addressed the rise of Latin American liberation theology or considered its implications for Native Americans, it is fortunate that Deloria is one who has. His exposure to a wide range of social, religious, and legal issues--through involvement in organizations such as the National Congress of American Indians, the executive council of the Episcopal Church, and the Institute for the Development of Indian Law--makes him uniquely qualified to appreciate the importance of new theological developments. [9] Though his views of Christianity are less than sympathetic, Deloria is better able than most to critique Latin American liberation theology from a Native American perspective.

In three articles published in the 1970's, Deloria covers the salient points in a Native American critique of liberation theology. Although his critique is ostensibly directed at the liberation theology movement in general, it

---

9. Linda Metzger and Deborah A. Straub (eds.), Contemporary Authors (New Revision Series) 20 (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1987), 130.

is clear that he is responding (as many North Americans were at that time) to the issues being raised by Latin American theologians. Furthermore, he shows little interest in addressing doctrinal issues; his main concern is more methodological, dealing with the foundational assumptions behind Western Christianity. As an important starting point, he is concerned about the nature of the liberation being discussed. Is the common experience of oppression sufficient in bringing together a coalition of disaffected peoples in pursuit of liberation? [10] Deloria replies that the situation requires not only a reordering of ideas and values but also a rearrangement of our means of perceiving and experiencing the world.

> If there were any serious concern about liberation, we would see thousands of people simply walking away from the vast economic, political, and intellectual machine we call Western civilization and refuse to be enticed to participate in it any longer. [11]

Beyond his concern about the nature of liberation, Deloria's critique of liberation theology reduces for the most part to a critique of Western Christianity and civilization. The points he raises can be loosely categorized into three areas: intellectual, cultural, and religious

---

10. Vine Deloria, Jr., "A Native American Perspective on Liberation," Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research, July 1977, 15-17, reprinted in Mission Trends No. 4: Liberation Theologies in North America and Europe, eds. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 261-2.

11. Ibid., 262.

issues. If we take these three broad (and overlapping) categories as together constituting "civilization," then the fundamental point Deloria is making is that Native Americans are characterized by a non-Western intellectual tradition, a non-European cultural tradition, and a non-Christian religious tradition. These historic and, to a good extent, contemporary realities represent barriers to communication when attempting to bridge the gap between the Western world and Native Americans.

It is Deloria's firm belief that the Native American understanding of reality is becoming increasingly important to the Western world, and that Native Americans speak for "aboriginal peoples who have not been heard but who represent the oldest of human religious traditions . . . ." [12] To what extent, then, can Native Americans benefit from Latin American liberation theology? Perhaps this question is best answered by considering what the Latin American theologians have to say in response to Deloria's critique.

NATIVE AMERICANS AND LATIN AMERICANS IN DIALOGUE

The Latin American theologians have been content, for the most part, to reformulate the content of theology with little regard for the premises on which their work is based.

---

12. Vine Deloria, Jr., "A Native American Perspective on Liberation Theology," in Is Liberation Theology for North America? The Response of First World Churches, eds. Sergio Torres and others (New York: Theology in the Americas, 1978), 15.

Both Juan Luis Segundo [13] and Clodovis Boff have noted this tendency:

> Until recently . . . . liberation theologians were content to do theology "differently," without concerning themselves with the rational justification of the original intuitions and attitudes supporting their theoretical practice. Nor did they go about establishing a critique of the technical resources that these intuitions and attitudes were to inform. [14]

Segundo, Boff and others have attempted to provide a methodological foundation for Latin American liberation theology, which has tended to be "intuitive and fragmentary." [15] How these efforts have addressed intellectual, cultural, and religious traditions is of interest to us here.

The Western Intellectual Tradition

One of Deloria's concerns about the Western intellectual tradition has to do with its understanding of time and space; it is here that the fundamental difference between Native American and Western concepts of history becomes evident.

> American Indians hold their lands--places--as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind. Immigrants review the movements of their ancestors across the continent as a steady progression of basically good events and experiences, thereby placing history--time--in the best possible light. When one group is concerned with

---

13. Juan Luis Segundo, Liberation of Theology (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1976), 5.

14. Clodovis Boff, Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), xxii.

15. Ibid., xxviii.

> the philosophical problem of space and the other with the philosophical problem of time, then the statements of either group do not make much sense when transferred from one context to the other without proper consideration of what is happening. [16]

Boff recognizes this tendency of Christian theologians to interpret the march of history in grand religious terms, and wants to replace the passive theology of history with an expressly active theology of the political. [17] Still, he does little to question the strongly linear understanding of history that undergirds Western thought and ignores more spatial interpretations of existence.

Yet for both Deloria and Boff, more important than the question of history is the epistemology supporting Western thought. While seeking to expand the definition of theology, to establish its function as critical reflection on praxis, Gustavo Gutierrez nevertheless contends that the traditional understanding is still valid. "Theology is of necessity both spirituality [wisdom] and rational knowledge. These are permanent and indisputable functions of all theological thinking." [18] Deloria finds this position problematic because it fails to raise serious questions about the authority of Western theoretical constructs in light of non-Western traditions. Boff admits to the need

---

16. Vine Deloria, Jr., God is Red (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1973), 75-6.

17. Boff, 48-50.

18. Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973), 6.

for raising these questions, suggesting "an alternating movement of critique and construction, analysis and synthesis" [19] when discussing epistemology itself. Yet he still regards "epistemology as ancillary to theology, and theology ancillary to the praxis of faith." [20] While this emphasis on commitment as the first step and theology as the second step [21] may have radical implications for the Christian faith, it has the effect of understating the importance of epistemological presuppositions.

The kind of epistemology that Deloria envisions, which is not evident and may not be possible as part of Latin American liberation theology, requires "the construction of a new and more comprehensive synthesis of human knowledge and experience." [22]

> Challenging [the Western] framework of interpretation means a rearrangement of our manner of perceiving the world, and it involves a reexamination of the body of human knowledge and its structural reconstruction into a new format. [23]

Considering "our manner of perceiving the world" naturally leads to a discussion of social analysis, a particular concern of liberation theology. Placing social analysis in the service of liberative praxis has the effect of requiring

---

19. Boff, xxvi.

20. Ibid., xxx.

21. See Segundo, 75-90.

22. Deloria 1977, 269.

23. Ibid., 263.

that understanding be interpreted into action. The effort to elucidate oppressive conditions must be efficacious. But is the use of Western methods--whether Marxist or capitalist--sufficient to accomplish this task? Boff is right to point out that there is no theology without sociology; "the only real alternatives are a theology mediated by a *critical* reading of its proper object and a theology mediated by an *uncritical* reading of the same." [24] The question here is: What criteria will be used to establish the critical reading? The use of Marxist analysis, while certainly appropriate in some Third World contexts, may ultimately prove to be incomplete in critiquing many situations of oppression.

Thus, the assumptions and presuppositions undergirding the Western intellectual tradition are limiting factors for Latin American liberation theology. While Native Americans can certainly benefit from this new understanding of the Christian faith, they must recognize its intellectual differences from their own tradition.

The European Cultural Tradition

Deloria sees the exploitation and oppression of Native Americans as deriving from "the secular value system of Western peoples, . . . which is simply the Christian religious worldview that has become transformed into social

---

24. Boff, 21.

theories." [25] This statement brings up several cultural characteristics--worldview, value system, social institutions--that deserve our attention. In contrast to the European tradition, Deloria sees the Native American worldview as being "essentially one of spirit and emotion . . . [that] can always reassert itself and rarely does so in institutional forms." [26] While the cultural revolution envisioned by Latin American theologians will necessitate the replacement of unjust social structures, they still tend to think in institutional terms.

Gutierrez is sensitive, though, to the need for indigenization of the revolutionary struggle.

> The liberation of our continent means more than overcoming economic, social, and political dependence . . . .
>
> It is to seek the building up of a *new man* . . . . This vision is what in the last instance sustains the liberation efforts of Latin Americans. But in order for this liberation to be authentic and complete, it has to be undertaken by the oppressed people themselves and so must stem from the values proper to these peoples. Only in this context can a true cultural revolution come about. [27]

Perhaps this focus on the nature of humanity itself, augmenting concern for society, has the potential for liberation from even the factors Deloria is citing.

---

25. Vine Deloria, Jr., "From Reservation to Global Society: American Culture, Liberation and the Native American," interview by Michael McKale, Radical Religion 2, no. 4 (1976), 49.

26. Deloria 1978, 16.

27. Gutierrez, 91.

We can extend our discussion of cultural tradition here by considering it in a broader sense, in terms of ideology. Segundo has articulated the need to "understand and appreciate the ideological mechanisms of established society" [28] as a means to placing theology in the service of oppressed peoples. Ideology is an inescapable aspect of human existence related to the act of faith.

> *No human being can experience in advance whether life is worth the trouble of being lived and in what way it might be worthwhile* . . . . Real life for a human being presupposes a nonempirical choice of some ideal that one presumes will be satisfying. It is this ideal, chosen ahead of time by nonempirical standards, that organizes and gives direction to the means and ends used to attain it. Those means and ends are what we have been calling ideology here.
>
> So the chief problem remains: How are human beings to choose their ideals when there is no empirical possibility of determining whether these ideals are worthwhile and will bring real satisfaction? . . .
>
> Be they Christians or not, all human beings begin to build up a set of values by trusting *in other human beings*. [29]

Ideology results as a natural consequence of identification with and commitment to a specific group of people, who possess a distinct cultural identity. It is only through ideological suspicion [30] that the sources of worldview and value systems can be unmasked and judged, on the basis of justice, for their relative worth.

---

28. Segundo, 39.

29. Ibid., 103-4.

30. Ibid., 9.

It would seem that the Latin American theologians have at least called into question some of the cultural factors present in their situation. The concern for cultural autonomy in the process of societal transformation and the deep appreciation for the role played by ideology are both encouraging signs. As Deloria points out, Native Americans "should be able to grasp the beneficial aspects of white culture" [31] without adopting those elements of it that would be to their detriment.

The Christian Religious Tradition

It seems that Deloria is echoing a theme central to liberation theology when he criticizes Christianity's historic

> emphasis on objective knowledge . . . . Thus religion has become a matter of the proper exposition of doctrines, and non-Western religions have been judged on their development of a systematic moral and ethical code rather than the manner in which they conducted themselves. [32]

Of course, the shift from orthodoxy (right belief) to orthopraxis (right practice) in defining the orientation of faith and the content of theology is foundational to Latin American liberation theology. In this regard the Latin American theologians clearly distinguish themselves from the academic approach of their North Atlantic counterparts.

> In general, European theology approaches reality through the mediations of thought, such as theology, philosophy,

---

31. Deloria 1976, 54.

32. Deloria 1977, 266.

> and culture. Access to reality comes through dialogue (critical rejection or critical acceptance) with a particular type of *thinking* . . . .
>
> By contrast, Latin American theology tries to approach reality as it is, even when it cannot draw any clear distinction between the reality as it is and the reality as interpreted theologically, philosophically, or culturally. [33]

This stance may lead us to ask what the role of doctrine is in such as system. Yet to pose such a question is to hint at a lapse into the traditional preoccupation with theory; this will not do. As Jose Miguez Bonino says, "truth is at the level of history, not in the realm of ideas." [34]

Nevertheless, this re-conception of truth has resulted in a thorough explication of it at the discursive level. In this regard the Latin American theologians rely heavily on the North Atlantic tradition for the religious/theological language they use. Latin American liberation theology "does not disdain the achievements of European theology and the theological ideas that have been developed in Europe." [35]

> Although the classic theologies of history are orientated more toward contemplation than action, they furnish a theology of the political with an indispensable type of reflection, . . . [36]

As most of the Latin American theologians have been trained in European seminaries, this orientation is understandable.

---

33. Jon Sobrino, The True Church and the Poor (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), 15-16.

34. Jose Miguez Bonino, Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 72.

35. Sobrino, 18.

36. Boff, 224.

But does this reliance on the categories and language of classical theology compromise their efforts at religious renewal?

Deloria suggests that new tools are needed if we are going to speak about religion in an inclusive sense.

> When I talk about new tools for use in reconstructing a sense of the religious I also mean a de-emphasis on concepts that have become traditional in the west. Almost all of the words that Christians use to describe their religious tradition are not the religious words of experience but technical legal words that are best used to describe legal processes or courtroom procedure . . . . When legal and political words are used to describe religious experiences and doctrines, the natural tendency when you face a reluctant audience is to revert to legal and political force to get your views accepted, for the logic of one is the logic of the other. [37]

Of course, the Christian "religious tradition" was founded on the experiences and beliefs of the early Christian community and was only later formularized by the Church. It seems that what Deloria is getting at here is the overtly scientific and technical nature of Christian theological language. Gutierrez tries to temper this tendency by repeating the liberation theology formula: commitment (spirituality) first, reflection (theology) second:

> The solidity and energy of theological thought depend precisely on the spiritual experience that supports it . . . . All authentic theology is spiritual theology. This fact does not weaken the rigorously scientific

---

37. Deloria 1976, 55.

> character of the theology; it does, however, properly situate it. [38]

We must keep in mind, however, that any language is both facilitating and limiting; the choice of a scientific, technical theological language will influence the results of the theological effort.

This brings us to the question of religious presuppositions, what we might refer to as metaphysics. As Deloria says, "at issue here [are] the basic metaphysical differences which separate us . . . . You [Christians] must deal with your own metaphysics." [39] While the Latin American theologians have done much to reorder religious and theological priorities, they still speak a language that is foreign to Native Americans.

Summary

It is Deloria's contention that liberation in the fullest sense will not be realized "until fundamental questions regarding the assumptions that form the basis for Western Civilization are raised . . . ." [40] Our consideration of various aspects of the intellectual, cultural, and religious traditions indicates that the Latin American theologians have raised some questions and ignored others.

---

38. Gustavo Gutierrez, We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), 36-7.

39. Deloria 1978, 14.

40. Deloria 1977, 269.

They show little interest in investigating, from a non-Western perspective, the epistemological basis of Western thought; yet they have a deep appreciation for the influence of ideological factors. Their reorientation of religious faith and practice is provocative, but stops short when it comes to the language they use. Indeed, the fact that we've addressed these issues on a categorical basis may betoken the real problem: Native American thought, culture and spirituality is holistic.

> The best way to approach [religion and politics] is to recognize that there are no distinctions in Indian life. Religion is not a separate category in Indian existence and neither is politics nor economics nor any other thing. Everything is intermingled into one view of life which is a highly spiritual view. [41]

In fairness to Deloria and the Latin American theologians, though, it must be pointed out that this dialogue is somewhat dated. Written over a decade ago, Deloria's articles address a Latin American liberation theology still in its infancy, and are more reaction than response. Deloria even admits that these articles do not fully represent his current understanding or point of view. [42] Furthermore, recent efforts by the Latin American theologians indicate a desire to address many of the methodological questions Deloria and others have raised. Also important is the fact that the movement's interpreters are increasingly sensitive

---

41. Deloria 1976, 52.

42. Vine Deloria, Jr., letter to the author, October 20, 1988.

to the particularity of Latin American liberation theology and to the need for considering the movement in relation to its context (i.e., critiquing it on the basis of its internal consistency). Keeping these things in mind, it seems likely that a more constructive critique of Latin American liberation theology by Native Americans will hinge on the question of praxis, not method. Like Latin Americans, Native Americans

> . . . have a particular responsibility and ministry to challenge the church on issues facing all Native Americans. . . . Our commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ, our love for our fellow [Christians], and our concern for the lives of Native American brothers and sisters leave us no choice but to proclaim God's word of justice and liberation. [43]

EXTENDING THE THEOLOGICAL HORIZON

It would seem that we have reached an impasse with regard to the usefulness of Latin American liberation theology for Native Americans. Before we curtail our effort, though, we should consider some new developments on the horizon. Latin American liberation theology, like most theological movements, is in a state of constant evolution, and it will not be surprising to find the Latin American theologians more sensitive in the future to some of the issues raised here.

---

43. Paul N. Schultz and George E. Tinker, Rivers of Life: Native Spirituality for Native Churches (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House / Fortress Press, 1988), 23.

The Recognition of Religious Syncretism

In a chapter entitled "In Favor of Syncretism: The Catholicity of Catholicism," [44] Leonardo Boff argues that Christianity is thoroughly syncretistic and that this is completely appropriate. Finding expression through the subjectivity of human culture, religion depends on this medium for life and vitality. "A religion, like Christianity, preserves and enriches its universality as long as it is capable of speaking all languages, incarnating itself in all cultures." [45] "Pure Christianity does not exist, never has existed, never can exist. The Divine is always made present through human mediations which are always dialectical." [46] Boff finds the basis for these statements in the Church's theological self-understanding.

Flexibility will be the key attribute of a Christianity intent on "becoming all things to all men," [47] as old syncretisms become obsolete and new ones are called for.

> The future of Christianity depends on its ability to formulate new syncretisms. Its present cultural expression, from Greco-Roman-Germanic culture, belongs to a glorious past. [48]

---

44. Leonardo Boff, Church: Charism and Power; Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1985), 89-107.

45. Ibid., 91.

46. Ibid., 92.

47. I Corinthians 9:22.

48. Leonardo Boff, 106.

It is encouraging to see Boff's appreciation for culture, especially in light of the following:

> Christian consciousness will have to . . . [place] toleration before condemnation, encouraging true Christian experience before watching out for its liturgical and doctrinal formulation. To trust in the religious experience of indigenous peoples is to surrender oneself to the Spirit who is wiser than all ecclesial prudence and who knows the true paths far better than the theological search for the purity of Christian identity. [49]

Perhaps other Latin American theologians will take up this theme and attempt to seriously address the barriers to growth and dialogue which characterize the Church today.

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The liberation theology movement is an immensely important development for Christianity, with the potential not only to participate in the liberation of oppressed peoples but also to revitalize the faith of oppressed and oppressor alike. Having endured oppression for nearly 500 years, Native Americans are in need of liberation as much as those living in the Third World are. Latin American liberation theology, by deconstructing traditional theological formulations and returning to biblical and apostolic roots, plays a critical role in the Third World theological movement. And Native Americans have much to gain by considering the efforts of other Third World theologians. Black theology's critique of the American experience from

---

49. Ibid., 107.

the underside, South African theology's struggle with the problem of homeland captivity, and African and Asian theologies' reflection on the meaning of religious and cultural pluralism, will all be valuable sources of insight for Native American Christians. Above all, they can join with these and others in considering what it means to speak of God in the midst of human suffering.