**Liberation theology**

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**Liberation theology**[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-0) is a [political movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_movement) in [Christian theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_theology) which interprets the teachings of [Jesus Christ](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_Christ) in terms of a liberation from unjust economic, political, or social conditions. It has been described by proponents as "an interpretation of Christian faith through the poor's suffering, their struggle and hope, and a critique of society and the Catholic faith and Christianity through the eyes of the poor",[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-1) and by detractors as Christianized [Marxism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxism).[[3]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-2)

Although liberation theology has grown into an international and inter-denominational movement, it began as a movement within the [Roman Catholic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Catholic) church in Latin America in the 1950s–1960s. Liberation theology arose principally as a moral reaction to the poverty caused by [social injustice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_injustice) in that region. The term was coined in 1971 by the [Peruvian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peruvian) priest [Gustavo Gutiérrez](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustavo_Guti%C3%A9rrez), who wrote one of the movement's most famous books, [*A Theology of Liberation*](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=A_Theology_of_Liberation&action=edit&redlink=1). Other noted exponents are [Leonardo Boff](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonardo_Boff) of Brazil, [Jon Sobrino](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jon_Sobrino) of [El Salvador](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/El_Salvador), [Óscar Romero](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%93scar_Romero) of El Salvador, and [Juan Luis Segundo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juan_Luis_Segundo) of Uruguay.[[4]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-3)[[5]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-4)

The influence of liberation theology diminished after proponents were accused of using "Marxist concepts" leading to admonishment by the [Vatican](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_See)'s [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congregation_for_the_Doctrine_of_the_Faith) (CDF) in 1984 and 1986. The Vatican criticized certain strains of liberation theology for focusing on institutionalized or systemic sin, apparently to the exclusion of individual offenders/offences; and for allegedly misidentifying Catholic Church hierarchy in South America as members of the same privileged class that would had long been oppressing indigenous populations since the arrival of [Pizarro](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francisco_Pizarro) onward.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-Wojda.2C_Paul_J._1995-5)

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**Theology**

Liberation theology could be interpreted as a western attempt to return to the gospel of the [early church](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_church) where Christianity is politically and culturally decentralized.[[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-6)

Liberation theology proposes to fight poverty by addressing its supposed source: sin. In so doing, it explores the relationship between [Christian theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_theology) — especially [Roman Catholic theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Catholic_theology) — and political activism, especially in terms of [social justice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_justice), [poverty](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poverty), and [human rights](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_rights). The principal methodological innovation is seeing theology from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed. For example [Jon Sobrino](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jon_Sobrino), S.J., argues that the poor are a privileged channel of [God's grace](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God%27s_grace).

Some liberation theologians base their social action upon the [Bible](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible) scriptures describing the mission of [Jesus Christ](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_Christ), as [bringing a sword](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/But_to_bring_a_sword) ([social unrest](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_unrest)), e.g. [Isaiah 61:1](http://bibref.hebtools.com/?book=%20Isaiah&verse=61:1&src=KJV), [Matthew 10:34](http://bibref.hebtools.com/?book=%20Matthew&verse=10:34&src=KJV), [Luke 22:35–38](http://bibref.hebtools.com/?book=%20Luke&verse=22:35%E2%80%9338&src=KJV) — and *not* as bringing peace ([social order](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_order))[[*better source needed*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ANOTRS)]. This Biblical interpretation is a call to *action* against poverty, and the sin engendering it, to effect Jesus Christ's mission of justice in this world.

Gustavo Gutierrez gave the movement its paradigmatic expression with his book *A Theology of Liberation* (1971). In this book, Gutierrez combined populist ideas with the social teachings of the Catholic Church. He was influenced by an existing socialist current in the Church which included organizations such as the [Catholic Worker Movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Worker_Movement) and the French Christian youth worker organization, *"[Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeunesse_Ouvri%C3%A8re_Chr%C3%A9tienne%22%20%5Co%20%22Jeunesse%20Ouvri%C3%A8re%20Chr%C3%A9tienne)".* He was also influenced by [Paul Gauthier](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Gauthier_%28theologian%29)'s *"*[*The Poor, Jesus and the Church*](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Poor,_Jesus_and_the_Church&action=edit&redlink=1)*"* (1965). Gutierrez's book is based on an understanding of history in which the human being is seen as assuming conscious responsibility for human destiny, and yet Christ the Savior liberates the human race from sin, which is the root of all disruption of friendship and of all injustice and oppression.[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-7)

Gutierrez also popularized the phrase "[preferential option for the poor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Preferential_option_for_the_poor)", which became a slogan of liberation theology and later appeared in addresses of the Pope.[[9]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-8) Drawing from the biblical motif on the poor, Gutierrez asserts that God is revealed as having a preference for those people who are “insignificant,” “marginalized,” “unimportant,” “needy,” despised” and “defenseless." Moreover, he makes clear that terminology of "the poor" in scripture has social and economic connotations that etymologically go back to the Greek word, *ptōchos*.[[10]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-9) To be sure, as to not misinterpret Gutierrez’s definition of the term "preferential option," he stresses, “Preference implies the universality of God’s love, which excludes no one. It is only within the framework of this universality that we can understand the preference, that is, 'what comes first.'"[[11]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-10)

Gutierrez emphasized practice (or, more technically, "[praxis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Praxis_%28process%29)") over doctrine. Gutierrez clarified his position by advocating a circular relationship between [orthodoxy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orthodoxy) and [orthopraxis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orthopraxis) seeing the two as having a symbiotic relationship.[[12]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-11) Gutierrez' reading of prophets condemning oppression and injustice against the poor (i.e. Jeremiah 22:13–17) informs his assertion that to know God (orthodoxy) is to do justice (orthopraxis).[[13]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-12) Cardinal Ratzinger, however, criticized liberation theology for elevating orthopraxis to the level of orthodoxy.[[14]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-13) Richard McBrien summarizes this concept as follows:

God is disclosed in the historical ‘’praxis’’ of liberation. It is the situation, and our passionate and reflective involvement in it, which mediates the Word of God. Today that Word is mediated through the cries of the poor and the oppressed.[[15]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-14)

Another important hallmark for Gutierrez's brand of liberation theology is an interpretation of revelation as "history". For example Gutierrez wrote:

History is the scene of the revelation God makes of the mystery of his person. His word reaches us in the measure of our involvement in the evolution of history.[[16]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-15)

Gutierrez also considered the Church to be the "sacrament of history", an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, thus pointing to the doctrine of universal salvation as the true means to eternal life, and assigning the Church itself to a somewhat temporal role, namely, liberation.

The struggle of women for social justice has given rise to its own liberation theology, frequently known as [feminist theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist_theology) in Europe and North America.[[17]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-Rowland2007-16) Black and other women of colour in the United States speak of [womanist theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Womanist_theology), while [Mujerista theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mujerista_theology&action=edit&redlink=1) denotes the liberation theology of Hispanic women.[[17]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-Rowland2007-16)

**History**

A major player in the formation of liberation theology was [CELAM](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latin_American_Episcopal_Conference), the Latin American Episcopal Conference. Created in 1955 in [Rio de Janeiro](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rio_de_Janeiro) (Brazil), CELAM pushed the [Second Vatican Council](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Vatican_Council) (1962–65) toward a more socially oriented stance.[[18]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-Pelton_1995-17) However, CELAM never supported liberation theology as such, since liberation theology was frowned upon by the Vatican, with Pope Paul VI trying to slow the movement after the Second Vatican Council.[[19]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-18)

After the Second Vatican Council, CELAM held two conferences which were important in determining the future of liberation theology: the first was held in [Medellín](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medell%C3%ADn), Colombia, in 1968, and the second in [Puebla](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puebla), Mexico, in January 1979.[[18]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-Pelton_1995-17) The Medellín conference debated how to apply the teachings of Vatican II to Latin America, and its conclusions were strongly influenced by liberation theology.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-Wojda.2C_Paul_J._1995-5)

Cardinal [Alfonso López Trujillo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfonso_L%C3%B3pez_Trujillo) was a central figure at the Medellín Conference, and was elected in 1972 as general secretary of CELAM. He represented a more orthodox position, becoming a favorite of pope [John Paul II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Paul_II) and the "principal scourge of liberation theology."[[20]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-Curti-19) Trujillo's faction became predominant in CELAM after the 1972 [Sucre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sucre) conference, and in the Roman Curia after the CELAM conference in [Puebla](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puebla), Mexico, in January 1979.

Despite the orthodox bishops' predominance in CELAM, a more radical form of liberation theology remained much supported in South America. Thus, the 1979 Puebla Conference was an opportunity for orthodox bishops to reassert control of the radical elements; but they failed. At the Puebla Conference, the orthodox reorientation was met by strong opposition from the liberal part of the clergy, which supported the concept of a "[preferential option for the poor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Preferential_option_for_the_poor)". This concept had been approved at the Medellín conference by [Bishop Ricard Durand](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Bishop_Ricard_Durand&action=edit&redlink=1), president of the [Commission about Poverty](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Commission_about_Poverty&action=edit&redlink=1).

Pope John Paul II gave the opening speech at the Puebla Conference. The general tone of his remarks was conciliatory. He criticized radical liberation theology, saying, "this conception of Christ, as a political figure, a revolutionary, as the subversive of Nazareth, does not tally with the Church's catechisms"; however, he did speak of "the ever increasing wealth of the rich at the expense of the ever increasing poverty of the poor", and affirmed that the *principle* of private property "must lead to a more just and equitable distribution of goods...and, if the common good demands it, there is no need to hesitate at [expropriation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nationalization), itself, done in the right way"; on balance, the Pope offered neither praise nor condemnation.

Some liberation theologians, however, including Gutierrez, had been barred from attending the Puebla Conference. Working from a seminary and with aid from sympathetic, liberal bishops, they partially obstructed other clergy's efforts to ensure that the Puebla Conference documents satisfied conservative concerns. Within four hours of the Pope's speech, Gutiérrez and the other priests wrote a twenty-page refutation, which was circulated at the conference, and has been claimed to have influenced the final outcome of the conference. According to a socio-political study of liberation theology in Latin America, twenty-five per cent of the final Puebla documents were written by theologians who were *not invited* to the conference.[[21]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-20) Cardinal Trujillo said that this affirmation is "an incredible exaggeration" (Ben Zabel 2002:139).

**Practice**

One of the most radical aspects of liberation theology was the social organization, or re-organization, of church practice through the model of [Christian base communities](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_base_communities) (CBCs). Liberation theology strove to be a [bottom-up](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Top-down_and_bottom-up_design) movement in practice, with Biblical interpretation and liturgical practice designed by lay practitioners themselves, rather than by the orthodox Church hierarchy. In this context, sacred text interpretation is understood as "praxis".

Journalist and writer [Penny Lernoux](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penny_Lernoux) described this aspect of liberation theology in her numerous and committed writings intended to explain the movement's ideas in North America. Base communities were small gatherings, usually outside of churches, in which the Bible could be discussed, and Mass could be said. They were especially active in rural parts of Latin America where parish priests were not always available, as they placed a high value on [lay](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laity) participation. As of May 2007, it was estimated that 80,000 base communities were operating in Brazil alone.[[22]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-nytimes-21) Contemporaneously [Fanmi Lavalas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fanmi_Lavalas) in [Haiti](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haiti), the [Landless Workers' Movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landless_Workers%27_Movement) in [Brazil](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brazil), and [Abahlali baseMjondolo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abahlali_baseMjondolo) in South Africa are three organizations that make use of liberation theology.[[23]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-22)

**Reaction within the Catholic Church**

In March 1983, [Cardinal Ratzinger](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cardinal_Ratzinger) (now [Pope Benedict XVI](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Benedict_XVI)) head of the Vatican's [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congregation_for_the_Doctrine_of_the_Faith) (CDF), made ten observations of Gutiérrez's theology, accusing Gutiérrez of politically interpreting the Bible in supporting temporal messianism, and stating that the predominance of [orthopraxis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orthopraxis) over orthodoxy in his thought proved a Marxist influence. Ratzinger objected that the spiritual concept of the Church as "People of God" is transformed into a "Marxist myth." In liberation theology he declared, the "people is the antithesis of the hierarchy, the antithesis of all institutions, which are seen as oppressive powers. Ultimately anyone who participates in the class struggle is a member of the "people"; the "Church of the people" becomes the antagonist of the hierarchical Church."[[24]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-23)

Cardinal Ratzinger did praise liberation theology in some respects, including its ideal of justice, its rejection of violence, and its stress on "the responsibility which Christians necessarily bear for the poor and oppressed."[[25]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-idem-24) He subsequently stated that no one could be neutral in the face of injustice, and referred to the "crimes" of [colonialism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonialism) and the "scandal" of the [arms race](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arms_race). Nonetheless, media reports tended to assume that the condemnation of "liberation theology" meant a rejection of such attitudes and an endorsement of [conservative](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservative) politics.[*[citation needed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACitation_needed%22%20%5Co%20%22Wikipedia%3ACitation%20needed)*]

In 1984, it was reported that a meeting occurred between the CDF and the CELAM bishops, during which a rift developed between Ratzinger and some of the bishops[[26]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology%22%20%5Cl%20%22cite_note-25) with Ratzinger issuing official condemnations of certain elements of liberation theology.[[27]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-26)[[28]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-27) These "Instructions" refuted the Marxist-based idea that [class struggle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Class_struggle) is fundamental to history, and rejected the interpretation of religious phenomena such as the [Exodus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Exodus) and the [Eucharist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eucharist) in exclusively political terms. Ratzinger further stated that liberation theology had a major flaw in that it attempted to apply Christ's sermon on the mount teachings about the poor to present social situations.[[29]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-28) He asserted that Christ's teaching on the poor meant that we will be judged when we die, with particular attention to how we personally have treated the poor.

Ratzinger also argued that liberation theology is not originally a "grass-roots" movement among the poor, but rather, a creation of Western intellectuals: "an attempt to test, in a concrete scenario, ideologies that have been invented in the laboratory by European theologians" and in a certain sense itself a form of "cultural imperialism". Ratzinger saw this as a reaction to the demise or near-demise of the "Marxist myth" in the West.[[25]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-idem-24)

Throughout the 1990s, Ratzinger, as prefect of the CDF, continued to condemn these elements in liberation theology, and prohibited dissident priests from teaching such doctrines in the Catholic Church's name. [Leonardo Boff](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonardo_Boff) was suspended and others were censured. [Tissa Balasuriya](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tissa_Balasuriya), in [Sri Lanka](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lanka), was excommunicated. [Sebastian Kappen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sebastian_Kappen), an Indian theologian, was also censured for his book *Jesus and Freedom*.[[30]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-29) Under Cardinal Ratzinger's influence, theological formation schools were forbidden from using the Catholic Church's organization and grounds to teach liberation theology in the sense of theology using unacceptable Marxist ideas, not in the broader sense.

Roman Catholic priest and author [Andrew Greeley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew_Greeley) also criticized liberation theology in his 2009 fictional book *Irish Tweed*. In Greeley's book, a [Chicago](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicago) Catholic school is taken over by a principal and priest practicing liberation theology, and its ideas, as Greeley saw them, are applied in the school environment. For instance, basketball team members are chosen based on their family's economic status rather than on their ability.[[31]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-30)

**Counter criticism**

Such criticisms have provoked counter-criticisms that orthodox Catholics are in effect casting the Catholic Church as a friend of [authoritarian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Authoritarian) regimes; and that the [Vatican](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_See) is not so much trying to defend pure doctrine as to maintain an established ecclesiastical and political order. This conflict could be compared to some aspects of the [Protestant Reformation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestant_Reformation). Outside Latin America, some of liberation theology's most ardent advocates are [Protestant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestant) thinkers (e.g., [Jürgen Moltmann](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C3%BCrgen_Moltmann) and [Frederick Herzog](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Herzog).)

There is also a [Christian humanist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_humanist) response that calls for a complete breakaway from clerical hierarchies and the formulation of an entirely new Christian theology, one based on recent historical analysis by biblical scholars like [JD Crossan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/JD_Crossan) highlighting the social revolutionary dimension of Jesus.[[32]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology#cite_note-31)