Las Casas as Theological Counteroffensive: An Interpretation of Gustavo Gutiérrez’s Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ

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Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez’s massive work, Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ, should not be read as a defensive or retreating move for liberation theology in the face of two decades of opposition. Rather, it is best understood as a creative and strategic counteroffensive to advance liberation theology in terms that the Vatican can only find difficult to counter. Nevertheless, liberation theology struggles with the difficulty of intellectually justifying itself on nondependency and non-Marxist grounds. In any case, the struggle for the work of liberation in Latin America continues.

Conventional wisdom has it that liberation theology is in trouble. Multiple besetting challenges and oppositions are said to be inducing the movement’s demise: the disintegration of socialism in the ex-Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Cuba; the replacement of many liberationist bishops with conservatives by an oppositional Pope John Paul II; the electoral defeat and splintering of the Nicaraguan Sandinistas; the shift in focus from Latin American dependency to Latin American debt; the Vatican’s ignominious silencing of Leonardo Boff; the renewal of electoral democracy in Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s; and the disillusioning character of multiple popular Latin American liberationist movements, including Peru’s brutal Sendero Luminoso. Signs of liberation theology’s plight are increasingly evident. Former liberationist militants, such as Hugo Assman, significantly moderating their thinking, and former champion of ecclesial progressivism, Leonardo Boff, feeling compelled to resign from the priesthood, it is suggested, disclose a movement in intellectual, ecclesiological, and political crisis.

The 1993 publication of Gustavo Gutiérrez’s Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ merely confirmed, for many, the impression of liberation theology’s demise. This massive, 682-page tome by the movement’s leading light is not a step forward, but backward. Las Casas is a retreat to the past, a defensive move. The going has gotten tough. The present is in crisis. So Gutiérrez is leading his readers to hunker down and keep hope alive by tapping into the continuity and stability of history, by taking solace in a great hero of days gone by. The passion and militancy of Gutiérrez’s earlier work is gone. But, given liberation theology’s present troubles, a defensive retreat to the past is about the best, and perhaps wisest, move that Gutiérrez could currently make. So it is said.

I suspect, however, that Gutiérrez had something entirely different and more clever in mind. Las Casas, it seems to me, is not most plausibly read as a defensive retreat to the comfort of the past. Rather, Las Casas is best read as a strategically offensive move that challenges Rome—indeed, the entire Catholic Church—with the imperative to reconstruct the very essentials of Christian systematic theology. Gutiérrez is not hunkering down. He is taking aim at the heart of the Vatican-guarded doctrines of christology, soteriology, eschatology, and missiology, and doing so in a politically keen way that leaves him virtually invulnerable to counterattack. With Las Casas, Gutiérrez appears to be saying that, not only is liberation theology not collapsing,
but that it is actually prepared to continue to challenge, on more secure grounds than ever, the very logic and content of existing, established Church doctrine; that theology still does, in fact, need to be radically reconstructed from the perspective and experience of the poor, the exploited, the marginal. If this reading is correct, then, to paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of the death of liberation theology may be greatly exaggerated.

For such a long and detailed book, Las Casas’ central argument is amazingly simple. It goes like this: if one begins with the basic, inescapable gospel commitments to love and to work for the salvation of one’s neighbor, and if one then experiences firsthand the unjust slaughter of the poor by a brutal social system, and if one then discovers that the Church’s established theology is actively legitimating this lethal social system, then one will have no option but to modify radically that theology so that it actually promotes, rather than violates, the gospel imperatives of love and evangelization. That is the book’s core assertion. All the rest—of which there is plenty—is fascinating elaboration.

Gutiérrez advances this argument, of course, by recounting the tumultuous life of the Dominican Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas, who worked as a missionary from 1502–1547 in what later became Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Peru. Las Casas came to the Indies to evangelize the natives. He confronted firsthand the ruthless genocide of the Spanish conquest and colonization, against which he protested. His protests were met by well-polished theological rationalizations for war, slavery, forced labor, and genocide, all in the name of Christ and—not incidentally—all composed by European theologians from Europe’s then theological center, Salamanca. By struggling in defense of the natives to refute these theological rationalizations, Las Casas was compelled not only to denounce injustice vociferously, but also gradually to reformulate radically his very understanding of who Christ is, what salvation is, what the Church should be, and how it ought to evangelize.

Gutiérrez’s point is that what was inexorably necessary for Bartolomé de Las Casas in the 16th century is equally necessary for the Church today. The Church’s systematic theology as it is currently composed is deficient. For it—like the established theology of Las Casas’ day—fails, as a systematic theology per se, adequately to challenge the suffering, exploitation, and death of the poor that every day violate the gospel. What is needed instead, therefore, is a conception of Christ, of salvation, of the Church, and of its mission that will empower believers, in the face of unjust and lethal social systems, to live in a way that is true to the gospel commands to love and evangelize one’s neighbors. Such conceptions will require drastic revisions of fundamental theologies.

The message here is clear: Gutiérrez is not content simply to tack justice and liberation onto the tail end of existing systematic theology. It is not, “Yes, all this and justice too, please,” as if the current theological superstructure is acceptable, as long as a few papal pronouncements or bishops’ letters that affirm the importance of social justice are attached. Rather, Gutiérrez is contending that really to take the gospel seriously in the actual world we inhabit today, we must do nothing less than reconstruct the heart of systematic theology. If so, this book indeed represents a major offensive riposte. In past years, liberation theology has often claimed only to embody a Latin American theology, appropriate for that context, and not a universal theology. Now Gutiérrez seems to be knocking on the doors of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith with a message about the end of business as usual. If so, that is hardly a consoling retreat to the past.

That Gutiérrez draws a direct link from Las Casas to the contemporary situation in this way is evident throughout the book. One representative, extended passage reflecting on Las Casas’ doctrine of salvation, however, will suffice to convey Gutiérrez’s suggestive intent (pp. 262–63, italics added):

May we speak of a systematic teaching of Bartolomé de Las Casas on the question of salvation—a Lascasian soteriology? It would be a great deal to ask. He is blazing new trails. We should like to indicate, however, that it
Las Casas was forced by faith and experience to pioneer new theological territory, and so, Gutiérrez suggests, are all his contemporary readers.

One clear feature of Gutiérrez’s overall argument is the strong continuity with the theology of liberation he developed in previous decades. The praxis-based methodology, the taking the perspective of the poor, the condemnation of unjust social systems, God’s identification with the poor, the critique of Euro-centric theologies, and the challenge to the Church to champion the cause of the exploited are all present. Gutiérrez is clearly not backing away from these commitments.

However, the deafening silence present in Gutiérrez’s argument is that of Marxist analysis and dependency theory. Marxism? Dependency theory? Who needs these to arrive at liberation theology? Las Casas certainly didn’t. He lived 300 and 400 years before their time. Nor, Gutiérrez implies, do we today. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Company can put away all fear and consternation. No warnings, disciplines, or silencings are necessary here. Liberation theology is not brandishing Marxism and dependency theory. It is just working with the basic gospel message and the unmerciful facts of life learned through lived experience in Latin America. That is all it takes to lead to liberation theology. And who will deny the gospel or the basic facts of life? Ratzinger and Company, Gutiérrez trusts, will not.

But the regrounding of liberation theology on a foundation absent Marxism and dependency theory represents only part of the book’s clever counteroffensive strategy. The larger strategic and political brilliance of Las Casas resides in the fact that Gutiérrez allows the historical figure of Bartolomé de Las Casas to stand for and speak the truth that, really, he wants to and is also speaking. Las Casas has enunciated already what for Gutiérrez is the truth. Now Gutiérrez picks up that speech and advances it into the world of contemporary theological discourse. This work’s direct, profound theological and social implications for the Church and the world today are hardly veiled from the reader by the historical context. Even only somewhat perceptive readers can see the powerful dominate and repress and then falsify the account, it is possible to discover certain aspects of the demands of the God who delivers. We also discover that, in order to proclaim the gospel and practice theology, we are sometimes obliged to abandon terrain to which we are accustomed, break with the familiar, the comfortable, and the secure, and walk—like Abraham—to an unknown land, along a desert trail where the only solid footing is faith in God and hope in the Reign of life.

Another important subtheme in Las Casas that functions as adroit theological counteroffensive is Las Casas’—and thus Gutiérrez’s—definition of what characterizes truly Christian evangelization. One strategy to displace liberation theology in Latin America that has been employed over the years by certain Vatican and Latin American Church leaders has been to launch fresh initiatives in “new evangelization.” Rather than allowing evangelization to coopt liberation, however, Gutiérrez happily embraces these calls for evangelization—as he always has embraced evangelization—and immediately moves to redefine that evangelization from a liberationist perspective. Concluding an iconoclastic reconsideration of salvation and heaven, for example, Gutiérrez writes (pp. 270–71; also see 458–60):
Las Casas would have read with great joy . . . Pope John Paul II [on religious freedom]. . . Las Casas asks respect for the religious customs of the dwellers of the Indies and rejects the imposition of the gospel by means of power, not only military power, but other forms that power may take as well, ignoring the transcendence of faith and the dignity of the person. . . . Respect for religious freedom is linked to respects for other basic human rights—among them, the most important of all, the right to life. . . . Here is the core of what we call today liberating evangelization. Its urgency on our continent today has not waned since the times of Bartolomé de Las Casas.

Preempting marginalization by an emerging alternative agenda, then, Gutiérrez enthusiastically embraces and assimilates that agenda as one element of the liberationist project. Again, such a tactic of embracing and redefining—which liberation theologians have employed successfully in the past, particularly in relation to the 1979 Puebla documents—is strategically a much more clever and efficient tactic than rejecting and openly battling against a nonliberationist version of evangelization.

Finally, however, it is worth observing—and perhaps to temper some of the optimism in this essay’s interpretation of Las Casas—that a certain conceptual danger does reside in the breaking of liberation theology’s association with dependency theory. As I have shown elsewhere (Smith 1991), neo-Marxist dependency theory was the original intellectual trigger generating liberation theology, and for years was a vital intellectual component, whether explicit or implicit, in the liberationist system of thought. Dependency theory provided the intellectual basis for a protest against the socially-structured exploitation of the third world by core economies and local elites, and against integration into the world capitalist system as a strategy for national development. Notwithstanding the fact that it may be possible now to sustain a liberation theology as a theology without reference to dependency theory, liberation theology nevertheless badly needs a coherent social analysis that can prescribe concrete social, political, and economic policies that will actually produce liberation in the real world. Otherwise it amounts to little more than good intentions. Yes, liberation theology can conscientize and empower people at the grassroots to become the subjects of history. But that alone is not enough—otherwise, one is assuming that Latin America’s ultimate problem is merely the fatalistic culture of the poor, which sounds vaguely reminiscent of 1950s-style modernization theory. So, empowerment to what end? What specific structural transformations will the conscientized demand or pursue, and why? Without dependency theory, or an adequate replacement, there is absolutely no theoretical reason why liberation theology could not become a reluctant cheerleader of mainstream development (desarrollismo), the very thing it decisively rejected as oppressive and exploitative in the late 1960s. Indeed, a book published the same year as Las Casas by Gutiérrez’s Bartolomé de Las Casas Institute, Liberación y Desarrollo in America Latina: Perspectivas (Instituto 1993), intimates this very possibility. But without a solid rationale for the necessity of systemic, structural transformations to achieve liberation, liberation theology would seem to have little to offer in terms of actual liberation that is particularly distinctive or attractive. This is a problem that liberation theology will, in my judgment, need to resolve in coming years.

In the expectation that this problem will be resolved, I return to my main argument and conclude that, less flush with optimistic militancy, perhaps, than Gutiérrez’s earlier works, Las Casas, if taken seriously, is no less potentially theologically challenging. In the struggle between liberation theology and the Vatican establishment, with all of its strategic and tactical moves and countermoves—which sociologists like us are keen to isolate and analyze—Gutiérrez seems to have more than survived the beating that liberation theology has been taking and, with Las Casas, appears to have successfully launched a major theological counteroffensive. Were I an advisor to the Vatican, I might counsel the tactic of playing dumb, and replying (with feigned smile): “Why Gustavo, what a nice work of historical theology, writing about a five hundred years old controversy! We’re glad to see that you’re occupying yourself with more constructive projects!” If only it were that simple for the Vatican.
DEDICATION

Dedicated to the memory of Fred Herzog.

REFERENCES