A Catholic Sociological Critique of Gustavo Gutierrez's
A Theology of Liberation: A Review Essay

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Introduction

The central purpose of this review essay is to provide a critique of *A Theology of Liberation*—a volume that in the words of Richard J. Neuhaus, "is simply the classic text of the theology of liberation movement"—from the vantage point of an orthodox Catholic sociological perspective. This task is important because Gutierrez's volume represents a "Catholic sociology" that is both religiously heterodox and sociologically unscientific yet is (or was) enormously influential within the Roman Catholic Church. Put another way, it is useful to analyze *A Theology of Liberation* in order to highlight what a Catholic sociology should not become if it is to be considered orthodox. Conversely put, a critique of the volume helps in moving positively in the direction of providing a sound method for the integration of Catholic theology and philosophy with sociology and the social sciences.

In evaluating *A Theology of Liberation* five generic issues must be addressed. 1) Theologically speaking, is the theoretical framework Catholic or consistent with Catholic thinking? 2) Sociologically speaking, is the theoretical framework sufficiently open to account for the relativities, contingencies, and complexities associated with social existence? 3) Do any subsequent social policy formulations operate within the broad boundaries set by the Faith? 4) Does the Catholic sociological method allow for a sphere immune from relativities, i.e., the necessary archimedean point of authentic Catholicism, the Church's Magisterium? 5) Is it Catholicism or some other cultural formation that possesses final authority in the intellectual exercise? Simply put, I will argue that *A Theology of Liberation* is a poor example of a "Catholic sociology" because it fails this five-fold examination.

Issue One: Is the Theoretical Framework Consistent with Catholicism?

In large part, the answer offered here is "no." The theoretical framework employed by Gutierrez is highly questionable from a Catholic perspective; especially problematical are his assumptions about the nature of man; society; Church; relations among man, society, and Church; class conflict; and ultimate salvation.

In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutierrez seemingly never tires of talking of the "creation of a new man" whether through the interrelated processes of class conflict as discussed by Marx (p. 220), the establishment of socialism as discussed by the the Mexican Don Sergio Mendez Arceo (p. 111), the evolutionary process as discussed by Teilhard de Chardin (pp. 32-3), the secularization process as discussed by Harvey Cox (pp. 66-8), the consciousness-raising techniques of Paulo Freire (pp. 91, 213), or the increased importance in human affairs of the social and natur-
al sciences, and high technology (p. 214). The common assumption that threads these interrelated processes is the idea of the almost total plasticity and malleability of the human being. Such an assumption is inconsistent with the Catholic natural law tradition, which Gutierrez considers to be an example of historically determined “essentialist and static” thinking (pp. 32-3). It is also at odds with the orthodox Catholic position that sin is, at its foundation, an individual matter that, of course, can and does have a social and collective dimension. Most generally, the image of the human being as “neutral clay” lends itself to all kinds of wild and destructive utopian thinking which is incommensurate with the realism historically associated with Church teaching.

**Society**

Gutierrez’s heterodox leanings regarding “society” point to his basic monism; he tends to collapse the sacred and the transcendent into the secular and the this-worldly. As he states, “rather than define the world in relation to the religious phenomenon, it would seem that religion should be redefined in relation to the profane. The worldly sphere appears in fact even more consistent in itself” (p. 67). As Gutierrez also argues, “since God has become man, humanity, every man, history, is the living temple of God. The ‘profane,’ that which is located outside the temple, no longer exists” (p. 194). Utilizing the suggestive framework of H.R. Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* (1951), Gutierrez errs in his attempt to turn the Catholic Church toward a “Christ of culture” direction, one that identifies the current cultural fads as authentically Catholic and Christian. As the author claims: “The goal is not only better living conditions, a radical change of structure, a social revolution; it is much more: the continuous creation, never-ending, of a new way to be a man, a permanent cultural revolution” (p. 32). In this position, he stands 180 degrees away from the opposite error of certain brands of Protestantism, i.e., the “radical” wing of the Protestant Reformation which accepts a “Christ against culture” stance and almost totally deprecates any religious significance to this-worldly existence and, to a slightly lesser degree, the Lutheran heritage with its sharp delineation between the “two kingdoms.” Gutierrez, for his part, has no use for the moderate dualism of the Catholic Church and of St. Thomas Aquinas which both distinguishes yet interrelates faith and reason, grace and nature, doctrine and experience, prayer and social action, Church and society, the Kingdom to come and worldly existence. The author speaks against any “distinction of planes,” one primarily religious, the other primarily secular, because “the model which distinguishes faith and temporal realities, Church and world, leads to the perception of two missions in the Church” (p. 63). For the author, “the distinction of planes appears as a burnt-out model with nothing to say to the advances in theological thinking” (p. 72). Gutierrez’s “advance,” in actuality, is only a retreat from authentic Catholic teaching.
Gustavo Gutierrez’s understanding of the Catholic Church is marred by his various intertwined misunderstandings regarding, 1) the nature of the Church, 2) the nature of "reality," 3) the primary mission of the Church, 4) the role of the Church vis-a-vis class conflict, 5) the role of the Church vis-a-vis the evolutionary process, 6) the nature of authentic ecumenical activities, and 7) the significance of Vatican II.

There is almost a virtual absence, for one thing, in *A Theology of Liberation* of any positive role for the Church’s Magisterium and doctrine, and the role of an organically evolving Sacred Tradition, given the emphasis that Gutierrez places on Church life emerging from a “praxis” as defined by intellectuals and social activists. The Church is not only defined solely as the “People of God” but the “People of God” is itself defined in terms of Marx’s proletariat. Catholicism, for Gutierrez, is apparently not for everyone, at least not until the world-wide socialist revolution has been successfully institutionalized. Furthermore, what is “really real” for the author is to be found within the plane of earthly existence. As he states, “there is the disenchantment caused by the apparent futility of work regarded as purely ‘religious,’ which has little contact with the reality and social demands of the continent. We are facing an ‘identity crisis’” (p. 105). Any discussion of Heaven can wait, for the author, because “the Church’s mission is defined practically and theoretically, pastorally and theologically, in relation to...(the)...revolutionary process. That is, its mission is defined more by the political context than by intraecclesiastical problems” (p. 138). The author goes further than defining a concern for social justice as a “constitutive element of the preaching of the Gospel” as does *Justice in the World* (1971) by arguing that a concern for poverty is the defining characteristic of the Gospel: the Church must “give the theme of poverty its proper importance: *the authenticity of the preaching of the gospel message depends on this witness*” (p. 288). Not only is class conflict a universal social reality for Gutierrez, but “this fact exists within the Church itself” (p. 277). The Church, for the author, is not united in its efforts to work for the benefit of humanity. As he states: “the unity of the Church is rightly considered...as a myth which must disappear if the Church is to be ‘reconverted’ to the service of the workers in the class struggle” (p. 277). Gutierrez argues that the different stages of the evolutionary process continually produce radically different forms of the Church. Given his reductionist analysis, the author speaks of “an institution which seems to be on the verge of bankruptcy...(and that)...a radical revision of what the Church has been and what it is now has become necessary” (p. 251).

The author’s evolutionary understanding of the Church fits nicely with his heterodox version of ecumenical relations; the future, apparently, will usher into existence some non-denominational version of a socially-oriented Christianity while Catholicism, as historically presented to the world, will peter out. For the
author, “meetings between Christians of different confessions but of the same political option are becoming more frequent. This new interaction gives rise to ecumenical groups, often marginal to their respective ecclesiastical authorities, in which Christians share their faith and struggle to create a more just society” (p. 104). Similarly, he notes that “Christians of different confessions are taking similar positions regarding the misery and injustice in Latin America, and this unites them more strongly than in intraecclesial considerations” (p. 278). His evolutionary understanding of the Church in time and place also allows him to see the binding documents of the Church as only provisional and always transitional. For the author, “the texts and especially the spirit of Vatican II are undoubtedly necessary as points of reference. Nevertheless, the new design of the problem was—and could only be—partially presented in the conciliar documents” (p. 46). Cardinal Ratzinger’s complaint that much progressive thought in the Church today assumes some imaginary Vatican III is supported through Gutierrez’s assertion that “many of the texts (of Vatican II) still reveal the burden of a heavy heritage; they timidly point to a way out from the turning in of the Church on itself; without always accomplishing this” (p. 295).

**Relationship of Man, Society, and Church**

Gutierrez’s wrongheaded understanding of these relations can be put quite simply: the world or society determines both the nature of the Church and man. The author speaks of a “dialectical” relation between the Church and society as follows:

This dialectical relationship...puts us on the track of a new way of conceiving the relationship between the historical Church and the world. The Church is not a non-world; it is humanity itself attentive to the Word. It is the People of God which lives in history and is oriented toward the future promised by the Lord...The Church-world relationship thus should not be seen in special terms, but rather in dynamic and temporal ones (p. 261).

The acknowledgement of this “reality” requires, for the author, some radical new thinking and redefinitions:

Because the Church has inherited its structures and its life style from the past, it finds itself today somewhat out of step with the history which confronts it. But what is called for is not simply a renewal of a new ecclesial consciousness and a redefinition of the task of the Church in a world in which it is not only present, but of which it forms a part more than it suspected in the past. In this new consciousness and redefinition, intraecclesial problems take a second place (p. 255).
Society forms not only the Church but also the very nature of mankind. For Gutierrez:

The underdeveloped countries, in relative terms, are always farther away from the cultural level of the center countries; for some it is difficult even to recover the lost ground. Should things continue as they are, we will soon be able to speak of two human groups, two kinds of people. Not only sociologists, economists, and political theorists, but also psychologists and biologists have pointed with alarm to the fact that the incessant widening of the distance between the developed and underdeveloped countries is producing a marked separation of two human groups; this implies the appearance, in a short time, of a true anthropological differentiation. (p. 86).

_class_conflict_

Gutierrez’s heterodox ideas concerning class conflict involve: 1) his belief that it is absolutely necessary in order to create the good society, 2) his positing of a too facile distinction between acceptable and unacceptable violence, 3) his rejection of all attempts to reform and incrementally improve a society, and 4) his injecting class conflict into the internals of Church life, foremost in the case of the reception of the Holy Eucharist.

For Gutierrez:

To participate in class struggle not only is not opposed to universal love; this commitment is today the necessary and inescapable means of making this love concrete. For this participation is what leads to a classless society without owners and dispossessed, without oppressor and oppressed. In dialectical thinking, reconciliation is the overcoming of conflict. The communion of paschal joy passes through confrontation and the cross (p. 276).

Furthermore, the author argues that, in considering the problems of violence in Latin America, one should:

By all means avoid equating the unjust violence of the oppressors (who maintain this despicable system) with the just violence of the oppressed (who feel obliged to use it to achieve their liberation). Theologically, this situation of injustice and oppression is characterized as a “sinful situation” (p. 108).

That the author’s utopianism runs amuck is evident in his rejection of all attempts at reform in society. This particular liberation theologian:
denounces as insufficient those partial and limited measures which amount only to palliatives and in the long run actually consolidate an exploitative system...Hence the criticism of "developmentalism," which advocates the capitalist model as a solution, and the calls for a radicalization or reforms which would otherwise in the long run...serve to consolidate new forms of the capitalist system, bringing with them a new dependence less evident but not less real. Hence also the term social revolution appears more frequently and opposition to it less (pp. 110-1).

Finally, for the author, class conflict affects even the sacrament of the Eucharist:

Living in a capitalist society in which one class confronts another, the Church, in the measure that its presence increases, cannot escape—nor try to ignore any longer—the profound division among its members...Participation in the Eucharist, for example, as it is celebrated today, appears to many to be an action which, for want of the support of an authentic community, becomes an exercise in make-believe (p. 137).

Salvation

Gutierrez's monism is most evident in his discussion of salvation as essentially a this-worldly project. Despite the official position of the Magisterium of the Church, the author declares that:

What we have recalled...leads us to affirm that, in fact, there are not two histories, one profane and one sacred, "juxtaposed" or "closely linked." Rather there is only one human destiny, irreversibly assumed by Christ, the Lord of history...We work...under the fear of falling back again into old dualities...and...under the permanent suspicion of not sufficiently safeguarding...the unique dimension of Christianity (p. 153).

"Salvation," for the author, "is not something otherworldly, in regard to which life is merely a test" (p. 151). Rather, "it seems clear today that the purpose of the Church is not to save in the sense of 'guaranteeing heaven.' The work of salvation is a reality which occurs in history" (p. 255).

Issue Two: Is the Theoretical Framework Sufficiently Open to the Empirical World?

The answer offered here is, once again, "no." Not only is Gutierrez's theoretical framework insufficiently "Catholic," but his framework is sociologically inadequate in that his a priori assumptions do not allow the empirical world to
reject or modify or develop the paradigm that initiated his analysis. It is crucial to point out that the Catholic sociological approach advocated in this essay does acknowledge the inevitability of a priori assumptions and conceptions influencing one’s understanding of the world; however, the task of the inductive, empirical stage of the Catholic sociological process is precisely to test empirically the validity and usefulness of those assumptions and conceptions. A *Theology of Liberation* fails on this count. Gutierrez’s failure in this regard is intimately tied to his use of class conflict and dependency theory, his understanding of secularization, his ignoring of the method that Max Weber termed verstehen or, conversely, his embrace of what Paulo Freire terms the process of conscientization; and, finally, his uncritical use of utopian thought in sociological analysis.

**Class Conflict/Dependency Theory**

While all sociologists are open to the possibility of class conflict occurring during a certain socio-historical period and place, Gutierrez, like all Marxist theorists, can be faulted for universalizing the process. First of all, societies vary in the degree to which conflict occurs within them; many societies are much more characterized by order than by disruption. Second of all, where conflict does exist, it by no means necessarily entails socio-economic conflict; other forms of conflict may more centrally involve religion, culture, ethnicity, region, occupation, or race. Simply put, while there are undoubtedly many specific instances of class conflict in Latin America and around the globe, Gutierrez is clearly guilty of “reading into” all situations the reality of class conflict where it simply doesn’t exist or where it isn’t the primary sociological dynamism. Put another way, Gutierrez is not sufficiently “open” to the empirical possibility that some other than Marxist paradigm may better explain social reality in some specific instances. As he states, “history is characterized by conflict which seems to impede...(the) building of brotherhood. There is one characteristic in particular which holds a central place: the division of humanity into oppressors and oppressed, into owners of the means of production and those dispossessed of the fruit of their work, into antagonistic social classes” (p. 272). “The class struggle,” he continues, “is part of our economic, social, political, cultural, and religious reality” (p. 273). Interestingly enough, Gutierrez makes the claim—which he later contradicts—that “recognition of the existence of the class struggle does not depend on our religious or ethical options” (p. 273). For the author, class struggle is a “fact” and “there is nothing more certain than a fact. To ignore it is to deceive and to be deceived and moreover to deprive oneself of the necessary means of truly and radically eliminating this condition—that is, by moving toward a classless society” (p. 274). The critic’s response here is simple enough: 1) Gutierrez’s “facts” are predetermined by his Marxist theory and 2) it is inconsistent for this liberation theologian to simultaneously talk of indisputable “facts” and the empirical possibility of a “classless society”!
Mention should be made that Gutierrez’s heavy-handed use of class-analysis also affects his understanding of the possible role that the Church can play in society. For the author, “the first step is to recognize that in reality a stand has already been taken: the Church is tied to the prevailing social system....The protection which the Church receives from the social class which is the beneficiary and the defender of the prevailing capitalist society in Latin America has made the institutional Church into a part of the system and the Christian message into a part of the dominant ideology” (p. 265). Similarly, the author states that “it is undeniable that the class struggle poses problems to the universality of Christian love and the unity of the Church. But any consideration of this subject must start from two elemental points: the class struggle is a fact, and neutrality in this matter is impossible” (p. 272). Thus does this Christian-Marxist ignore the many empirical instances in which the Church is able to serve as an intelligent and compassionate “mediator” between all parties thus, improving, incrementally as it may be, the lot of the poor. Again, the author’s “either/or” and “dichotomous” thinking violates an often complex social reality.

The author’s application of his Marxist class-conflict theory ties him into accepting, in mechanistic fashion, a dogmatic version of what is termed “dependency theory.” As he argues, “only a class analysis will enable us to see what is really involved in the opposition between oppressed countries and dominant peoples....Thus the theory of dependence will take the wrong path and lead to deception if the analysis is not put within the framework of the worldwide class struggle” (p. 87). Thus, this Marxist-Christian agrees with those who assert that “in large measure the underdevelopment of Latin America is a by-product of capitalist development in the West” (p. 109). He continues, again, citing his position as an indisputable “fact”: “the underdevelopment of the poor countries, as an overall social fact, appears in its true light; as the historical by-product of the development of other countries. The dynamics of the capitalist economy lead to the establishment of a center and a periphery, simultaneously generating progress and growing wealth for the few and social imbalances, political tensions, and poverty for the many” (p. 84). The author’s dogmatic understanding of dependency theory ignores the empirical possibilities that not all Western influence in Latin America has a negative impact, that perhaps cultural factors play a role in the underdevelopment of the continent, and that, in general, factors “internal” to Latin America must be considered in any comprehensive and useful analysis.

Secularization

Gutierrez’s analysis is also deficient in his unqualified claim that widespread “secularization” has occurred in Latin America and around the globe. The empirical evidence of most sociologists of religion suggests that a full secularization is a reality mostly for a select and unrepresentative group of intellectuals and other
members of what can be termed "a new knowledge class." Is it possible that both Gutierrez's theology and sociological analysis appeal only to a discontented and privileged few while traditional Catholicism, albeit with important qualifications, is still accepted by the mass of individuals? Or is it possible that where Catholicism does lose adherents, it loses its adherents to a fundamentalist Protestantism which comes across as more "strict" in doctrine and offers a richer devotional life? Put another way, the degree to which Catholicism is weakening in its influence in Latin America may be due precisely to the degree to which it accepts the vision of Gustavo Gutierrez and his ilk. For, despite all empirical evidence, Gutierrez asserts:

The values and irreversibility of the process we now refer...(to)...as secularization have become more obvious...(Secularization appears not only)...as a breaking away from the tutelage of religion, as a desacralization...(but better yet as)...the result of a transformation of the self-understanding of man. From a cosmological vision, man moves to an anthropological vision, due especially to scientific developments. Man perceives himself as a creative subject...This new self-understanding of man necessarily brings in its wake a different way of conceiving his relationship with God...In the future...(the Christian community)...will have to live and celebrate its faith in a nonreligious world (pp. 66-8).

Verstehen/Conscientization

All sociological explanation, at least according to the majority of sociologists influenced by Max Weber, must attempt to take into account the thoughts and feelings of the individuals who are being studied in social context. This method sociologists call "verstehen," which, in German, means "empathetic understanding." The sociologist who doesn’t incorporate a verstehen aspect into his analysis runs the strong risk of superimposing his own interpretation of reality on the subjects he is attempting to understand. The disregard for verstehen is another major sociological failure of Gutierrez; he definitely does not allow the average Latin American to speak for himself. Instead, he endorses Paulo Freire’s attempt to establish a "pedagogy of the oppressed." For Gutierrez:

By means of an unalienating and liberating "cultural action" which links theory with praxis, the oppressed person perceives—and modifies—his relationship with the world and with other people. He thus makes the transfer from a "naive awareness"—which does not deal with problems, gives too much value to the past, tends to accept mythical explanations, and tends toward debate—to a "critical awareness"—which delves into problems, is open to new ideas, replaces magical explanations with real
causes, and tends to dialogue. In this process, which Freire calls “consci­
entization,” the oppressed person rejects the oppressive consciousness
which dwells in him, becomes aware of his situation, and finds his own
language. He becomes, by himself, less dependent and freer, as he com­
mits himself to the transformation and building up of society (p. 91).

Sociologically speaking, what “conscientization” translates into is not any step
into a “truer” or “freer’ consciousness but what is referred to as “resocialization” by
sociologists and “brainwashing” by the average layperson. Gutierrez thus refuses
to give what Peter L. Berger calls “cognitive respect” to the social reality as under­
stood by the average citizen, leading to gross misunderstandings regarding the
average person’s degree and nature of secularization and alienation from existing
cultural, religious, and political authorities.

**Utopian Thought in Sociological Analysis**

The analysis advocated in this essay in one sense obviously endorses the idea
that sociological analysis is necessarily affected by non-rational, in some instances,
“utopian” thought that cannot, strictly speaking, be empirically proved. I cannot,
*qua purely empirical sociologist*, prove the existence of God or that the Catholic
Church is of divine origin. However, what I can do is argue that the social teaching
of the Church, complete with its principles, concepts, and assumptions, is useful—
indeed more useful than those deriving from competing worldviews—in the
explanation of social reality. On the one hand—and despite his previous and
naive inference that facts speak for themselves—Gutierrez is literally correct
when he states that “Utopia...is neither opposed to nor outside of science. On the
contrary, it constitutes the essence of its creativity and dynamism....The theoretical
construct which allows us to know social reality and which makes political action
efficacious demands the mediation of the creative imagination” (p. 234). On the
other hand, Gutierrez is to be seriously faulted precisely for not attempting to
check or test the usefulness of his inspired or “creative” imagination. He allows
his sociology to be uncritically influenced by utopian elements to the detriment of
his empirical analysis.

**Issue Three: Is Social Policy Consistent with the Faith?**

The “social policy” that emanates from Gutierrez’s theological and sociological
analysis is here not viewed as consistent with the teachings of the Catholic
Church. For the author, “only a radical break from the status quo, that is, a pro­
found transformation of the private property system, access to the power of the
exploit(ing) class, and a social revolution that would break this dependence would
allow for the change to a new society, a socialist society” (p. 26-7). Any attempt to
reform or ameliorate the weaknesses of a capitalist (and by implication, feudalistic)
society are viewed by the author as "synonymous with timid measures, really ineffective in the long run and counterproductive to achieving a real transformation" (p. 26). A Theology of Liberation provides social policy formulations inconsistent with the Faith because it dogmatically asserts that socialism is the only viable option for the Christian, that class conflict is a necessary evil to be found in all empirical cases, and that attempts to reform and improve capitalist and feudalistic societies are intrinsically doomed to failure. The Church teaches, instead, that any social system may be compatible with the Faith if it meets the test of certain basic material and, more importantly, spiritual requirements.

**Issue Four: Is the Magisterium Viewed as the Final Arbiter of Truth?**

The answer here is, again, definitely "no." As Gutierrez states, "we must recognize...that the ecclesiocentric point of view is abandoned more rapidly in the realm of a certain theological reflection than in the concrete attitudes of the majority of the Christian community. This presents not a few difficulties, for what is most important is what happens at this second level" (pp. 261-2). The idea that the Pope and those Bishops in loyal communion with him serve as final arbiter of the Truth for the Church is lost upon the author; Christian truth, again, "bubbles upward" from the People of God. More accurately and specifically, for Gutierrez, truth is determined by the reflections of what I've previously termed a "new Catholic knowledge class" of theologians, intellectuals, bureaucrats, and social activists who are essentially in a form of "class conflict" with the Magisterium over the right to generate, interpret, and implement socio-religious knowledge. The real final arbiters of truth, for the liberation theologian, are what Marx referred to as the "handmaidens of the revolution." For the author, "only with the exercise of the prophetic function...will the theologian be—to borrow an expression from Antonio Gramsci—a new kind of "organic intellectual." He will be someone personally and vitally engaged in historical realities with specific times and places. He will be engaged where nations, social classes, people struggle to free themselves from domination and oppression by other nations, classes, and people" (p. 13). The Magisterium of the Church is viewed from this perspective, as, at best, irrelevant to, at worst, part of the dominant class to be overthrown.

**Issue Five: Is Marxism or Catholicism the Ultimate Authority?**

Implicitly, at least, any social scientific analysis posits some ultimate authority that stands in the command post of decision-making regarding such issues as which fundamental intellectual principles should be employed to interpret the "factual world" and what types of social reforms are permissible given these principles. The question then becomes: what is the ultimate authority in A Theology of Liberation? I accept here the argument of Archbishop Marcos McGrath who
implies that Gutierrez’s ultimate authority is not that of the faith correctly understood:

In his famous book published in 1973, *A Theology of Liberation*, he makes the statement that liberation theology is not a question of a new theology, but a new way of doing theology. This is the heart of the problem: theological reflection should begin by examining reality with the light of the faith. He, however, already includes in his view of reality elements of Marxist analysis. He tends to include a political option and implies without a political option there is no mediation of the faith...As I see it...the problem is methodological. It amounts to including in a supposedly “objective” view of reality a given ideological interpretation, even before introducing the Gospel and the light of faith. What happens, then, is that elements of faith are criticized on the basis of the accepted ideology and cut to its size. Ideology judges faith, which is the reverse of good and valid theological method, in which faith must judge ideology.³

The fact that Gutierrez allows Marxism to “wag the tail” in front of the face of Catholicism is intimately tied into his understanding that *theology follows praxis* instead of helping to interpret it. For the author, “Theology is a reflection, a critical attitude. Theology follows; it is the second step...Theology does not produce pastoral activity; rather it reflects upon it. Theology must be able to find in pastoral activity the presence of the Spirit inspiring the action of the Christian community” (p. 11). Quoting Yves Congar, he continues: “instead of using only revelation and tradition as starting points, as classical theology has generally done, it must start with facts and questions derived from the world and from history” (p. 12). It should be pointed out, in fairness, *that in Gutierrez’s mind*, his theology based on some supposedly “pure induction” or what he terms “orthopraxis” “is not meant to deny the meaning of orthodoxy, understood as a proclamation of and reflection on statements considered to be true. Rather, the goal is to balance and even to reject the primacy and almost exclusiveness which doctrine has enjoyed in Christian life and above all to modify the emphasis, often obsessive, upon the attainment of orthodoxy which is often nothing more than fidelity to an obsolete tradition or a debatable interpretation. In a more positive vein, the intention is to recognize the work and importance of concrete behavior, of deeds, of action, of praxis in the Christian life” (p. 10). *Regardless of his intention*, the criticism of Gutierrez on this point is straight-forward: given that the empirical world is always viewed through some kind of theological and philosophical lens, the liberation theologian’s use of “orthopraxis” encourages him, at whatever level of self-conscious awareness, to prioritize Marxist conceptions over those Catholic. Put another way, Gutierrez’s “orthopraxis” is yet another version of the modernist theology that the
Lutheran theologian, George Lindbeck, in his *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984) has termed “experiential expressive.” At the root of Gutierrez’s theology is the belief that “there is present in all believers—and more so in every Christian community—a rough outline of a theology. There is present an effort to understand the faith, something like a pre-understanding of that faith which is manifested in life, action, and concrete attitude. It is on this foundation, and only because of it, that the edifice of theology—in the precise and technical sense of the term—can be erected. This foundation is not merely a jumping-off point, but the soil into which theological reflection stubbornly and permanently sinks its roots and from which it derives its strength” (p. 3). Put crudely, the critical point in responding here to Gutierrez is that in order authentically, from a Catholic viewpoint, to “read the signs of the times,” one must first be taught the doctrine of the Church. Implicitly, at the very least, Gutierrez is reading the “signs of the times” through a Marxist lens.

Although, literally speaking, at least from the analysis offered here, a primarily “inductive” theology is a contradiction in terms, the author of this essay heartily endorses what can be termed the recent “Catholic neo-orthodox” attempt better to incorporate an inductive analysis as a way to show the universal relevance and applicability of the Catholic faith throughout time and space. In Archbishop Marcos McGrath’s own words which, by the way, implicitly outline a Catholic sociological approach:

> There has always been...a role for “inductive theology” but it has come strongly into its own in our own period. What is it? Basically, it is a religious reflection that derives from a consideration of the reality we live in and looks at that reality through the eyes of faith. We try to see the human social problems in that reality. Then we reflect upon them with the light of the Gospel and project outward what we believe we should do about this situation...We look through the eyes of faith at the problems; we judge these problems and then project out to the world. This is the method the Church has been using broadly for the previous thirty to forty years, but which was consecrated by the Council to become the method to complement the deductive. We do not discard a deductive procedure, because God has spoken and from His Word we deduce. We also have the inductive approach, however, which expands the area of religious consideration to take in our modern situations and problems and illuminates them through the light of faith, so that we can walk more clearly in such circumstances.4

**Conclusion: Recovering the Sacred in Sociology and the Social Sciences**

If my analysis in this essay is correct, then Gregory Baum is incorrect when he states that “rumor has it that after reading Gustavo Gutierrez’s *A Theology of
Liberation, Pope John Paul II said that he found nothing against Christian faith in the book. If my analysis is correct then Joseph Ramos also is wrong—at least about the theological adequacy of Gutierrez’s volume—when he argues that “discrepancies...emerge not from...(Gutierrez’s)...theological position, but from his position regarding the social doctrine of the Church and the social sciences, and more concretely his socialist route to liberation.”

By criticizing Gustavo Gutierrez’s influential volume, *A Theology of Liberation*, through the framework of an orthodox Catholic sociology, I have attempted to demonstrate one method by which sociology and the other social sciences can “recover the sacred.” Such an attempt must be anything but heavy-handed and crude; it must respect the “relative autonomy” of the social sciences while authentically being based on a true understanding of the Catholic vision. Historically, this *via media* has not been met; either social science has been rejected *tout court* as outside the pale or has been allowed to subsume or bury the faith. The Church can neither attempt to turn the clock back through any facile rejection of the modern intellectual disciplines nor capitulate to the secular reductionist tendencies of the modern age. However, the attempt to institutionalize a Catholic social scientific perspective—a key aim of the newly established Society of Catholic Social Scientists—requires a central commitment from orthodox Catholic leadership that has not, as yet, been forthcoming. And such a perspective, integrating profession with faith, would require that the oath of Catholic allegiance concerning “university teachers of disciplines dealing with faith or morals” be logically extended to all newly appointed social scientists teaching at Catholic educational institutions.

**Notes**


