Journal of Moral Theology, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2026): 148–158

The Theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez and Its Echoes in Contemporary Theological Ethics

Juan Miguel Espinoza Portocarrero

Translated by Alexandre A. Martins

Abstract: Given the recent death of the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez (1928–2024), this essay analyzes two central themes in the thought of this Latin American prophet that have contributed to the renewal of contemporary moral theology after the Second Vatican Council. First, the article explains the novel articulation between the promise of Christian salvation and the human experience of liberation from political and socioeconomic oppression, which is one of Gutiérrez's most original ideas. Second, it delves into Gutiérrez's contribution as one of the pioneer theologians in understanding human suffering as a theological challenge that requires complex ethical responses that harmonize the concrete face of the oppressed and their historical conditions with the structural causes that make them victims of social injustice.

FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF THE PERUVIAN THEOLOGIAN Gustavo Gutiérrez (1928–2024), it is appropriate to revisit the theological legacy he forged throughout his life and to reflect on the enduring influence of his thought on the history of Latin America and global Catholicism. Undoubtedly, we stand before one of the most brilliant minds of the twentieth century. His contribution to the development of Latin American liberation theology has been recognized as a milestone in contemporary critical thought and in the de-Europeanization of Christianity.

For contemporary theology and Catholic social ethics, Gutiérrez's ideas constituted a "true revolution" during the final third of the twentieth century, as the American theologian Michael E. Lee emphasizes.[1] Gutiérrez helped to expand the Catholic religious imagination by incorporating a renewed articulation of the connection between faith and politics, positioning the preferential option for the

[1] Michael E. Lee, "El profeta que revolucionó la teología católica para los pobres," *Páginas* XLIX, no. 276 (2024): 16.

poor as a constitutive dimension of Christological faith and Christian ethics.

This essay explores two central themes in the thought of this prophet of the excluded and discarded of the Earth, themes that fueled the renewal of contemporary moral theology in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. First, I examine the novel articulation between the promise of Christian salvation and the human experience of liberation from forms of oppression, one of Gutiérrez's most original ideas. Second, I delve into Gutiérrez's contribution as one of the pioneering theologians to understand human suffering as a theological challenge requiring complex ethical responses in order to harmonize the concrete face of those who suffer, the historical conditions of the problem, and the structural causes that render such suffering a social injustice.

LIBERATION AND SALVATION

It is impossible to understand Gustavo Gutiérrez outside of his historical circumstances. His theological reflection was shaped by the world of the 1960s, during a pivotal confluence of socio-economic inflection in both Latin American and global history. Amidst the geopolitical conflicts of the Cold War, this decade was characterized by the spread of a cultural protest movement with a global reach. The questioning of the political and economic powers of the international order, as well as of traditional institutions and values, sparked a wave of utopian optimism that placed its trust in the imminent emergence of a more democratic "new world." In Latin America specifically, sociopolitical transformations took place, stemming from the crisis of the oligarchic order and the growing challenge—posed by professionals, university students, labor unions, and social collectives—to the unequal distribution of wealth and power. The Catholic Church experienced a newfound vitality with the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) and its reception in Latin America at the General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate in Medellín (1968); this event mobilized a generation of Catholics toward dialogue with the challenges of modernity and development, as well as toward the struggle against social injustices.

Gutiérrez knew how to interpret his historical moment and developed a combined intellectual reflection and pastoral practice that served as a source of inspiration for believers and non-believers alike. According to Lee: "In a world that was just beginning to understand the structural causes of poverty and violence, and in a Church that was only beginning to confront the challenges of modernity, Father Gutiérrez was a prophet who saw clearly how the Christian

proclamation of salvation involved not only the hereafter but also included human liberation in this life."[2]

Within the turbulent historical process of 1960s Latin America, Gutiérrez identified a sign of the times: the sociopolitical *irruption of the poor*, struggling to escape misery and to build a more just society for the majority. Nourished by his exchanges with other theologians, social scientists, and Catholic movements, Gutiérrez came to recognize in this phenomenon a context from which to "construct a theology suited to the situation of Latin America, a reality marked by social injustices and humiliating poverty," as Leonardo Boff recalled in his tribute of thanksgiving for his cherished companion on the journey. [3]

The first generation of liberation theologians, a group in which figures such as Gutiérrez and Boff stood out, chose to link the life of those who were marginalized in their societies to their struggles for justice, because it was there, in this reality of marginalization and struggles for liberation, that they discovered God's salvific action unfolding in a contemporary manner within the Latin American, "here and now." From the world of the poor, who were resisting forms of "institutionalized violence," [4] these theologians articulated a utopian horizon intended to guide a Christian praxis committed to bringing the Kingdom of God into history amidst a suffering continent. For this Christian utopia, rooted in the development of the critical consciousness of the oppressed of the Earth and the reclaiming of their sense of dignity as agents of history, an active hope that God will fulfill their promise to establish a new creation and a new humanity emerges in experience of faith within the challenges of history.

Situated within this context, Gustavo Gutiérrez holds the distinction of being one of the pioneering theologians to articulate an understanding of salvation as an *intra-historical reality*, doing so from a non-European perspective. Inspired by the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council, Gutiérrez, in his book *Teología de la liberación* published in 1971, identifies the movements struggling against economic, political, and cultural dependency, as well as against unjust socioeconomic structures, as the very ground upon which the promise of salvation, offered by the God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, is actualized in present history. Through a re-reading of the Hebrew theology of creation and salvation, the Book of Exodus was understood as a paradigm affirming that political liberation constitutes a historical form in which human beings

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[2] Lee, "El profeta que revolucionó la teología católica para los pobres," 16.
[3] Leonardo Boff, "La fuerza de los pequeños," *Páginas* XLIX, no. 276 (2024): 8.
[4] CELAM, *Documento conclusivo de la Segunda Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano en Medellín*, Paz no. 16.

experience salvation. In Gutiérrez's own words: "To struggle against a situation of misery and dispossession, and to build a just society, is to insert oneself now into the salvific movement that is marching toward its full realization." [5]

The indissoluble unity between salvation history and human history is a point upon which Gutiérrez insisted. Following this premise, processes of liberation constitute *theological loci* for discerning God's action today, inspiring communities to transform structures of violence and injustice as signs that concretize the confrontation between grace and sin within history. From the perspective of faith, these struggles acquire their significance by being situated within an eschatological horizon, in which action to transform the present functions as a source of revelation about God's activity and the ultimate meaning of history.

Gutiérrez is clear in asserting that the horizon of political liberation represents a partial historical realization of the divine promise of salvation, for no human experience can contain that promise in its absolute fullness. While a close relationship exists between temporal progress and the growth of the Kingdom of God, they are not equivalent realities. According to Gutiérrez, "The historical, political, and liberating event constitutes a growth of the Kingdom. It is a salvific occurrence, yet it is neither the arrival of the Kingdom itself, nor the entirety of salvation."[6] Nevertheless, for the author, it is undeniable that the political engagement of both Christians and non-Christians, undertaken to foster more humane conditions amidst a historical situation marked by inhumanity, represents a concrete realization of the Kingdom.

Furthermore, the political praxis of liberation, understood as the promotion of a new type of human person in order to construct a more humane society, serves as a sign that anticipates the future toward which the eschatological promises of the God revealed in Jesus are directed; for Jesus continues recreating his salvific work in the present through the power of the Holy Spirit. Commitments to social justice are inspired by the promise of full communion among God, human beings, and the rest of creation; simultaneously, they serve as a testimony that inspires others to hope that embracing this life choice is indeed a worthy endeavor. Consequently, Gutiérrez's eschatological

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[5] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación: Perspectivas*, 7th ed. (Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1990), 256. The original in Spanish says: "luchar contra una situación de miseria y despojo, y construir una sociedad justa es insertarse ya en el movimiento salvador, en marcha hacia su pleno cumplimiento."

[6] Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación,* 285. The original says: "el hecho histórico, político, liberador es crecimiento del Reino, es acontecer salvífico, pero no es la llegada del reino, ni toda la salvación."

reading of liberation processes led him to emphasize the role of an active hope, oriented toward the future, as both a source of inspiration and a guide for action in the present. To undertake a commitment to confront and to reform structures of injustice is to cooperate with God's work of salvation today. And those efforts will not be in vain because, in Christ, we have witnessed that grace and life always triumph over sin and death.

In this perspective, Gutiérrez appeals to the notion of utopia to reconcile political praxis and Christian faith. While, once again, these are not equivalent categories, amidst a world of injustice and violence, a Christian cannot adopt a neutral stance. On the contrary, Christians must choose in favor of the liberation of the oppressed and the construction of a new, just, and fraternal social order, one that inevitably presupposes confronting historical structures of sin. Thus, utopia is that historical-political horizon which, by unmasking reality in all its contradictions, mobilizes us toward an attainable temporal goal that serves as a foretaste of the eschatological coming of the Kingdom. Without intending to reduce the Kingdom of God to a mere utopia, Gutiérrez maintains that it is impossible to historicize salvation without concretely engaging with a political vision of a new humanity and a new society, in harmony with the values of the Gospel.

HUMAN SUFFERING AS A THEOLOGICAL-SPIRITUAL CHALLENGE

In his formidable history of Catholic moral theology, the Jesuit ethicist James Keenan observes that one of the theological innovations of the twentieth century was the emergence of a concern for alleviating human suffering, understood as a moral practice throughout the millennia-long history of Christian spirituality, that became a central theme in theological reflection.[7] Since the 1970s, systematic theology and theological ethics have asked about the specific nature of the causes and dynamics of suffering, as well as the diverse array of resources available to confront it. Keenan notes that theological approaches regarding the *why* of suffering and *what we can do* to relieve it have been enriched by a more comprehensive understanding of the human person, drawn from insights offered by the social sciences and contemporary philosophy. The moral agent is not merely an individual hermetically sealed within themselves, but rather a social being defined by their relationships with others and situated within a historical context characterized by specific social structures and cultures that shape their conscience.[8]

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[7] James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Theological Ethics* (Paulist Press, 2022), 306.

[8] Keenan, *A History of Catholic Theological Ethics*, 304–305.

In this shift, Gustavo Gutiérrez, as a systematic theologian by training, served as one of the catalysts for the emergence of human suffering as a central theological inquiry.[9] For Gutiérrez, a Christian utopia conceived from the lens of the Kingdom of God had to be envisioned "from the underside of history," by participating in the lives of the poor, their joys and sufferings, as well as their struggles to transform their perceived insignificance into processes of humanization.[10] Seeing reality through the eyes of the poor led to an experience of conversion that mobilized believers to embody the Gospel proclamation of the primacy of life, while simultaneously denouncing the power of death, a force so visibly manifested in the inequalities prevalent throughout Latin America. In this sense, the poor constituted a primary, or foundational, *theological locus*, a sacrament of God within history. By hearing their cry, God renewed their promise of salvation, understood as liberation from structures of oppression, and called all humanity to join in this salvific movement.

By an act of intellectual justice, it is necessary to affirm that Gutiérrez's concern and perspective were shared by other liberation theologians. In the wake of El Salvador's bloody civil war (1979–1992), Jesuit theologians Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino articulated the category of "crucified people," establishing a connection between the lives of the poor in the so-called Third World and the mystery of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.[11] According to Sobrino, death subjected these crucified peoples in three historical forms: (1) economic poverty resulting from unjust structures; (2) political repression caused by wars and the refusal of the powerful to relinquish their privileges; and (3) cultural ethnocide, insofar as the social order strips them of their cultures in order to weaken their identity and render them defenseless.[12] Walking with the poor led to a recognition of their status as victims of an unjust economic and political system that ruthlessly ravaged their lives while masking this reality behind false ideologies of progress.

Nevertheless, the crucified peoples brought salvation, much like the crucified Christ, who is the model of the "suffering servant of Yahweh." For Sobrino, such a scandalous statement was not mere intellectual speculation, but rather a matter of grasping reality. Its historically salvific aspect lay in being a "light that unmasks the lie"

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[9] Keenan, *A History of Catholic Theological Ethics*, 306.

[10] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología desde el reverso de la historia* (Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1977).

[11] Ignacio Ellacuría, "El pueblo crucificado, ensayo de soteriología histórica," *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 6, no. 18 (1989): 305–333; Jon Sobrino, "Los pueblos crucificados, actual siervo sufriente de Yahvé," en *El principio-misericordia: Bajar de la cruz a los pueblos crucificados* (Sal Terrae, 1992), 83–95.

[12] Sobrino, "Los pueblos crucificados, actual siervo sufriente de Yahvé," 85.

of an unjust and violent global order. But, above all, the crucified peoples "show us where we must go," becoming living signs of a Christian utopia, insofar as their practice of solidarity and fraternity constitutes a model for regenerating the world through new, more humane forms of social relationship. Their potential lies in offering subversive values that contradict the prevailing civilization and are in harmony with the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. In Sobrino's words, "The poor possess a humanizing potential because they offer community against individualism, service against selfishness, simplicity against opulence, and openness to transcendence against positivism."[13]

The harsh reality of the suffering of the poor, and the theological significance of their struggles for dignity and justice, demanded that Christians and, of course, theologians make a preferential option for the poor. This was a mandate that meant standing in solidarity with the marginalized and confronting the structures of political and economic power that oppress them. Moreover, for Latin American liberation theologians, the option for the poor served as a hermeneutical principle for interpreting scripture and Catholic tradition through the lens of critical reflection born from the practice of taking responsibility for the concrete suffering visible in the faces of the poor.

Gutiérrez contributed to establishing key categories for the subsequent development of liberation theology. These categories had a profound impact on global theological ethics. Through a fruitful dialogue with the social sciences, he stressed that one must recognize that the causes for the drama of human suffering transcend the realm of individual behavior or interpersonal dynamics. There are structures of economic and political power that, silently, shape and legitimize patterns of oppression and domination.[14] For Gutiérrez, the struggle against poverty, violence, and other forces that retard human growth requires an analysis of what he named "structures of sin," understood as forms of political, social, and economic organization responsible for perpetuating the suffering of the world's impoverished majorities for the benefit of certain elites who concentrate power.

The concept of "structures of sin" broadened the understanding of moral agency within theological ethics, a field that, in the Catholic tradition, had been linked primarily to deliberate personal action. Through this category, those in power, even if they did not directly inflict violence upon the poor, were held responsible for the existence of the structural conditions underlying such suffering. Similarly, indifference toward these structures, as well as a complacent tolerance

[13] Sobrino, "Los pueblos crucificados, actual siervo sufriente de Yahvé," 93.
[14] Keenan, *A History of Catholic Theological Ethics*, 307.

of them, constituted a social sin, for it tacitly endorsed an alienating social order and yielded indirect benefits to those who remained silent.[15]

The consciousness of the structural dimension of sin served as a call to action. From his earliest writings, Gutiérrez urged the forging of a new way of being church, one that would awaken from its complicity to "step out of the ghetto" to seek the "root causes" of the problems afflicting Latin American peoples, and to engage in the process of liberation, which demanded the "permanent creation of a new way of being human."[16] Undoubtedly, this novel articulation of the relationship between faith and politics from the perspective of a preferential option for the poor stands as one of Gutiérrez's most significant innovations.

Nevertheless, in his mature theological works of the 1980s, Gutiérrez maintained a persistent focus on grounding the preferential option for the poor as a constitutive principle of the Christian tradition. For him, the Bible served as the primary source for affirming that solidarity with the poor possessed a theological character, rather than being merely an ethical imperative. In his study of the Book of Job, Gutiérrez rediscovered that the suffering of the innocent was an ancient theological inquiry that acquired new nuances when viewed through the lens of the Latin American context, marked as it was by misery and political violence. Thus, he reinterpreted the problem of theodicy by raising one of the fundamental questions of his thought: "How can one speak of a God who reveals themselves as love within a reality marked by poverty and oppression? How can one proclaim the God of life to people who are suffering a premature and unjust death?"[17]

The history of Catholicism was another important resource to which he turned in his defense of the option for the poor, as revealed by his monumental work on the Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas (1474–1566).[18] The life of this advocate for the recognition of the dignity of indigenous populations during the colonization of the Americas was interpreted by Gutiérrez as a precursor to liberation

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[15] To delve into the development of the concept of "structure of sin," see Daniel J. Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice," *New Blackfriars* 92, no. 1039 (2011): 341–357, doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01355.x.

[16] Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Prólogo," en *Signos de renovación: Recopilación de documentos post-conciliares de la Iglesia en América Latina* (Comisión Episcopal de Acción Social, 1969), 6.

[17] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Hablar de Dios desde el sufrimiento del inocente: Una reflexión sobre el libro de Job*, 3rd ed. (Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 2004), 19.

[18] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *En busca de los pobres de Jesucristo: El pensamiento de Bartolomé de las Casas* (Instituto Bartolome de las Casas, 1992).

theology and a Christian model of what it meant to respond to suffering within a context of domination.

Without neglecting his commitment to remaining rooted in the Catholic tradition, Gustavo Gutiérrez was an interpreter of the historical reality in which he lived. His 1978 book *La fuerza histórica de los pobres* (The Historical Power of the Poor) stands as a resounding expression not only of his conviction that the poor were increasingly becoming the protagonists of history but also of his political-intellectual acumen in analyzing a Latin American conjuncture that oscillated between the political violence of military dictatorships and guerrilla movements and the tenacious struggle of social collectives for social justice and the democratization of their societies.[19]

Furthermore, Gutiérrez exercised moral leadership during the bloodiest period of Peru's internal armed conflict (1980–2000), a period characterized by human rights violations committed by the subversive group *Sendero Luminoso* and the Armed Forces, the worsening of the economic crisis, and the intensification of poverty. Through his involvement in various initiatives led by the Catholic Church and civil society, as well as through his opinion columns in the national press, he contributed to the resistance against the spiraling violence, firmly denouncing human rights violations and issuing persistent calls to build peace founded on justice and fraternity.[20] During those years, he reflected on the image of the God of Life, drawn from the Book of Wisdom, to inspire initiatives of civic resistance against violence, fostering a dialogue between Christian faith and human rights advocacy. [21]

Gutiérrez's life was marked by misunderstanding and hostility from certain sectors of the Church hierarchy and powerful groups, who sought to discredit his rich intellectual work to silence his criticisms of authoritarian regimes, the normalization of unequal economic structures, and the structural causes of poverty. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith initiated a formal inquiry to assess the orthodoxy of his theology, a process from which, after many years of difficult yet honest dialogue, he ultimately emerged vindicated. Even with tensions between some sectors of the Catholic Church and liberation theologians, the Church's magisterium has recognized the contribution of Latin American theologians like

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[19] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *La fuerza histórica de los pobres*, 3rd ed. (Instituto Bartolome de las Casas, 2024).
[20] Olle Kristenson, *Pastor in the Shadow of Violence. Gustavo Gutiérrez as a Public Pastoral Theologian in Peru in the 1980s and 1990s* (University of Uppsala, 2009).
[21] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *El Dios de la vida* (Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas y Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1989).

Gutiérrez by incorporating the preferential option for the poor as a foundational principle of Catholic social doctrine; as Pope Benedict XVI affirmed, this option "is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for our sake, to enrich us with his poverty."[22] Pope Francis, for his part, has established the preferential option for the poor as a central theme of his own magisterial teaching, a commitment clearly reflected in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (the roadmap for his pontificate) and in his social encyclicals, *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*. Gutiérrez's intellectual creativity and perseverance have ensured that the poor are recognized as concrete faces and historical agents, placing the work of alleviating their suffering at the heart of the Catholic Church and of the global development agenda.

CONCLUSION

The different ways in which Gutiérrez's intellectual trajectory has inspired new paths for the development of theological reflection and contemporary critical thought will certainly be the subject of further academic study. Without aiming to offer a comprehensive examination of his legacy but rather beginning this conversation, this essay has emphasized Gutiérrez's contribution to contemporary theological ethics, specifically regarding the articulation between faith and politics, between liberation and salvation, and, above all, the centrality that the problem of human suffering has increasingly assumed within this theological discipline since the 1970s. Gutiérrez's liberation theology developed categories that have been appropriated by Catholic moral theology, particularly within the tradition cultivated in Latin America.[23] The most central of these, undoubtedly, is the preferential option for the poor; yet equally relevant have been the articulation of concepts such as structural or social sin, *concientización* (critical consciousness), integral liberation, and the God of Life, among many others.

From a broad perspective, Gutiérrez and the first generation of liberation theologians helped to mature the theological and political conviction that efforts to build a world with more humane conditions must be envisioned from the standpoint of the poor and through the act of sharing life with them. This criterion serves as an antidote to prevent political proposals that become ideologies to mask reality in

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[22] Benedicto XVI, "Discurso en la Sesión inaugural de la V Conferencia general del Episcopado latinoamericano y del Caribe," May 13, 2007, vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/es/speeches/2007/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070513_conference-aparecida.html.

[23] Keenan, *A History of Catholic Theological Ethics*, 318–319.

order to perpetuate new forms of domination and power interests. Moreover, these liberating theological insights serve as a stimulus for the continued development of contemporary moral theology.

Thinkers like Gustavo Gutiérrez are more relevant than ever today, as we inhabit a dystopian world threatened by a global ecological crisis and the resurgence of authoritarian political projects that were once believed to have been banished from the public sphere following the Second World War. His life and, above all, his personal witness challenge intellectuals and leaders to overcome apathy and to set out in search of the artisans of fraternity and social poets who, from the existential and geographical peripheries, resist evil and labor to forge a new creation. M

Juan Miguel Espinoza Portocarrero is an Associate Professor in the Department of Theology at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. His research examines the reception of the Second Vatican Council in Latin America, as part of the project Vatican II: Legacy and Mandate, which is preparing an international and intercultural theological commentary on the documents of this event and their impact on the global Catholic Church. Notable among his publications are the books *Más en las obras que en las palabras: historia de los centros sociales de la Compañía de Jesús en el Perú* (2021) and *Universidad en salida: catolicismo, ciudadanía y responsabilidad social en la historia de la Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú* (2022).

Alexandre A. Martins, PhD, is a Brazilian theologian and bioethicist, serving as an associate professor in the Department of Theology and the College of Nursing at Marquette University. He is currently serving as President of the Brazilian Society of Moral Theology (2024–27).