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What is Liberation Theology?

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Flores: Good morning, Professor Goizueta. It's a pleasure to have you with us at the Boisi Center to discuss the origins of liberation theology, its relevance for Catholics, and its influence in contemporary American public life. Let us begin by establishing precisely what liberation theology is and how it evolved into a theological movement.

Goizueta: Liberation theology is a theology done through the eyes of the poor. It is an attempt to understand Scriptures, Christian tradition, and ultimately who God is and who Christ is from the perspective of the poor.

It originates in an epistemological presupposition that Christ has a particular identification with those who are marginalized – that is with those who are excluded. In the gospels he specifically says that this is where he can be found. Therefore, that is where the theologian, or the Christian, must go first to encounter Christ. So, if we claim to be talking about Christ, then we must first have that frame of mind.

Flores: So, given this epistemological shift, what are some of the major sources for liberation theology?

Goizueta: Ultimately, it's derived from scripture, from especially the Gospels. Some of the more significant passages for liberation theology include the famous last judgment parable in the 25th chapter of Matthew, the beatitudes, and

the *Magnificat*. In the Hebrew Bible the story of Exodus and the prophets are particularly central.

Catholic social teaching also helped shape liberation theology in important ways. Practically speaking, Catholic action groups in Latin America—groups of Catholic university students—attempted to implement Catholic social teaching in Latin American societies.

From the '50s through the '70s, base ecclesial communities—small communities of the poor—would gather to read Scripture and to try to implement their understanding of the Scriptures in everyday life. Through these exercises that attempted to make the connection between personal faith and their social context, they made important contributions to the development of liberation theology.

In both Catholic action groups and the base communities, priests who had been trained in Europe would return to Latin America to try to implement their theological studies. In many cases they would come to the conclusion that the theology they had learned in Europe was not particularly relevant to the Latin American reality. So it was through these groups that they began to articulate a theology that came out of that grassroots experience with the communities in Latin America.

Flores: You mentioned the relationship between the development of liberation theology and Catholic social teaching. Could you elaborate more on this connection?

Goizueta: There are a few themes from Catholic social teaching—such as the common good and dignity of the person—that serve as an inspiration for liberation theology. These ideas have been central in liberation theology from the beginning. I would say the influence, very generally, comes from the principal themes, and directions, and orientation of Catholic social teaching.

Slater: One criticism of liberation theology is that it is too political. How would liberation theologians respond to this criticism?

Goizueta: The question itself presupposes a contemporary context where the political and the religious are seen as separate spheres of life. In Jesus' time, that was not the case. The religious institutions, such as the temple, had a political function. Jesus' so-called religious statements and actions were perceived as having political implications and being subversive. He threatened the status quo.

For example, Jesus lived in a society with very strict and rigid barriers between different classes of people. There were clearly defined groups

who were considered pure and impure. For Jesus to reach beyond those barriers to associate with the lepers, women, children, and those who were handicapped in any way was inherently political and was perceived as such. That is why he was crucified.

More fundamentally, when Jesus speaks of the coming of the kingdom of God, it is an implicit condemnation of kingdoms of human beings. At the very least, that proclamation relativizes human governance. Therefore, it was perceived as threatening by any human authority when Jesus came along and said that my ultimate authority is no human authority, but God.

In a certain sense, what happens in liberation theology is a breakdown of that rigid boundary between the political and the religious, or between the social and the private. Being a faithful person who is committed to following Christ has all sorts of political implications in the broadest sense. That doesn't necessarily mean that one becomes a political activist, *per se*. However, living in a way in which it is clear that one's ultimate allegiance is to God is itself a political action or political statement.

Slater: Basically, you're saying that liberation theology is in some ways a realization of the radical nature of Christianity itself?

Goizueta: Correct. Christianity and, I would argue, any religious belief which presupposes that empirical reality is not ultimate has political implications and will be perceived as subversive. You can see this in Asia with Buddhism, for example, and in other world religions.

Flores: Let's shift gears and talk about liberation theology in US public life today. Can you explain how liberation theology among marginalized communities in the United States differs from liberation theology in the global South – Latin America, Africa, or Asia?

Goizueta: It depends on which liberation theology in the United States. As I mentioned, at the heart of liberation theology is a preferential option for the poor. Now, what constitutes poverty can vary from context to context. It doesn't simply divide along group lines. A person can be "poor" or marginalized as a woman, but not so as a middle-class North American. The same is true of African-Americans, or Latinos, or Asians.

But what does happen, at least among certain groups in the United States, is that issues of culture, race and sometimes language take on particular significance. Those become the instruments by which and through which various groups are marginalized, which distinguishes the types of marginalization that we see in the United States from the kinds we usually see in Africa or Latin America. This division, however, does not hold in every situation.

To clarify, a Latin American living in Latin America does not usually experience cultural marginalization, although, he or she might experience marginalization as an indigenous person. By and large, the cultural issue is more significant in the United States than it is in the countries of origin for many of these groups.

Flores: With that distinction in mind, could you reflect on the role of US liberation theologies in public life today? For example, how does liberation theology affect the role of Latinos in American public life?

Goizueta: If you are thinking of liberation theology as a preferential option for the poor, then I would say that it would affect public life insofar as groups are motivated to take political stances based on certain questions. For example, how does this policy, how will this candidate, how does this initiative, or this budget, impact the poorest, the marginalized? That would not be the only question for someone thinking in the terms of liberation theology, but the first question one would ask in making political decisions.

Flores: So, do you think concern for the poor is a priority in US politics?

Goizueta: Unfortunately, I think that in the political debates today, the poor or the marginalized have been excluded to a great extent. I think we have yet to make, or to see, a strong argument made for a preferential option for the poor as a necessary component in the promotion of the common good in the United States. I don't think you can promote the common good without first understanding that until and unless we promote the good of those who are most excluded in our society, we cannot begin to think about the common good.

Plus, I think that liberation theology, in the United States, at least publicly, has a bad reputation for all sorts of reasons. It's in a lot of people's self-interest to reject it and to perceive it as Marxist or socialist. But also, there is just a lot of ignorance about it. Liberation theology is one of those buzzwords that everybody thinks they understand. However, very few have actually read any liberation theology.

Frankly, I would say that the problem is as much on the right as on the left. There are plenty of misunderstandings and misappropriations of liberation theology among people who say they support it. Perhaps if they really knew it or understand, they would not be such strong advocates.

Flores: How do you see liberation theology affecting party politics in the coming years? For example, after the 2012 election, we saw both Republicans and Democrats trying to respond to the influence of Latinos on the outcome of

this election. How do you think political party structures will respond to these changes in the coming years?

Goizueta: It's hard to say. I think that there's new energy around the issue of immigration, which I think is central to our dealing as a nation with the preferential option from the poor, as immigrants are a group that is excluded in the most literal sense. At the same time, I think there are generational shifts occurring in the Latino community. Parallel to these shifts are economic changes, as Latinos climb up the social ladder, become increasingly privileged.

One aspect of the option for the poor, which liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez talks about repeatedly, is that the poor themselves have to make an option for the poor. That is, one makes an option for the poor not because the poor are better people, but because God is good, and because God makes an option for the poor. Therefore, it becomes an explicitly theocentric and theological option.

I think the risk is that, as Latinos become more economically successful, we forget about those within our own community that continue to be marginalized economically, racially and in other ways. As a number of us begin to climb the social ladder and become assimilated and integrated, it could lead to a cooptation of identity by the parties for those Latinos who have made it. So it will be interesting to see what kinds of presidential candidates the parties put forward in the next election.

Flores: It will be interesting to see who the candidates are in 2016 and how that will affect the votes from particular communities. I would like to take these last couple minutes to shift focus and consider the relevance of liberation theology for the contemporary church.

The papal conclave begins today. There has been a lot of speculation about the influence of the global South on the election of the next pope. How do you think the concerns of poor or marginalized people will affect the conclave? Do you expect that the next pope will incorporate the concerns of liberation theology into his papacy?

Goizueta: As I just mentioned, simply belonging to the poor – or in this case, being Latin American – does not mean that one understands one's faith from the perspective of the poor. That a cardinal or bishop hails from a third-world country does not necessarily mean that they understand the church, their faith, and the faith of their people from the perspective of the poor.

There has been, unfortunately, over the past 30 years or so, a concerted effort to basically wipe out liberation theology and the teaching of liberation theology in Latin America, particularly in seminaries. Thus,

much of the theology that taught in Latin America and Africa is not necessarily a theology that's done from the perspective of the poor. Often times it is as Roman as any theology taught in Rome. The challenge becomes, then, reintegrating a preferential option for the poor as the basis of theological understanding.

On the other hand, I would say that in some ways, liberation theology has been a victim of its own success. Because the preferential option for the poor is no longer perceived as something that's strange, it is taken for granted in many church circles and in some official church documents.

I was recently in Latin America and asked a similar question to some Chilean theologians, and that was their response. They said that you can't do theology, regardless of what kind of theology you do, in Latin America today without taking into account the preferential option for the poor. It has become accepted theme in essentially all theology in Latin America.

Slater: If liberation theology or the preferential option for the poor doesn't seem radical anymore, how do you get people to consider it in a meaningful way?

Goizueta: I really think that we have to return to the original and most fundamental meaning of the option for the poor, which is essentially spiritual. Namely, we have to understand that to be united with God, in Christ and through Christ, we must strive alongside the poor because Christ himself has said, this is where I am present.

I don't think it's ultimately a political option. I don't think it's ultimately an economic option. Ultimately, it comes down to this question: which God do I worship? Can I worship the God of the Scriptures, the God of Jesus Christ, unless I do so in those places, and among those people with whom that Jesus Christ has said he is present?

And if I don't, then the question then becomes, well, which God are you worshipping? Liberation theologians say you're worshiping an idol. Because if you worship in a context that excludes those among whom Jesus says, 'I am present,' then you are worshipping some God other than the God of Jesus Christ.

Flores: Thank you for joining us today.

Goizueta: Thank you for having me.