AFRICAN INCULTURATION
LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

Liberation theology is renowned as one of the strongest theological trends in our contemporary society. It is arguably maintained that Latin American theologians have conscientised and explicitly oriented people into this manner of theologising. Among the prominent exponents are scholars like G. Gutierrez, L. Boff, C. Boff, J. L. Segundo, J. Cambrine, J. M. Bonino and J. Sobrino.

Nevertheless, this mode of doing theology is not a confine of Latin America. We find it also in Europe as political theology with exponents like J. Moltmann and J. B. Metz, in North America as Black Power theology with exponents like J. H. Cone and G. S. Wilmore; in South Africa as Black theology with exponents like A. A. Boesak and B. Tlhagale; in independent Africa South of the Sahara with exponents like L. Magesa and M. A. Oduyoye. We find it in Asia too.

As implied above, Africa too has liberation theology. But the question is, is the liberation theology we qualify as African really African? Is it just sheer replica of OTHERS’ Liberation theologies or a mere abstraction? Can we actually say, this is our African Liberation theology? If we can assert this, what characteristics and elements should it have to affirm its distinctiveness and specificity, in view of a global mutual contribution?

Dr. L. Magesa C., one of our African theologians committed to Liberation theology by words and deeds, is of the strong conviction that African Liberation theology is as real and peculiar as any other in the world. In this connection he says:

Thus the widespread notion, that sees in African liberation theology a replica of Latin American liberation theology is factually a misconception. The sooner it is abandoned the better. D. W. Fern argues correctly that "That diverse and rich culture of Africa, in addition to its unique experience of Christianity, represents a fresh challenge to those seeking to understand African notions of liberation." Not only that: the historical experience of Africa whose effects are still with us, and the present day reality as people perceive and live it, are likewise challenges that give to African liberation theology its particular character and outlook.¹

Taking Magesa’s deep remarks into account, our article concerns itself with proposing an African liberation theology within our African context. As we
venture into this task it should be noted that the nature of our theme and the subsequent limitation imposed in a journal demands that we reserve detailed explications for a future major work in the form of a monograph. As such, we will commence with an elaboration of the nature of inculturation and that of liberation theology. Then we will explain the levels of oppression within the perspective of our theology. After that we will discuss the notion of liberation theology and liberation theologies. Our next and most important step will be that of actually but briefly presenting our own African liberation theology. The article will end with some critical reflections on the future of our proposed kind of liberation theology.

1. THE NATURE OF INCULTURATION AND LIBERATION THEOLOGIES

We will begin with an elaboration of what inculturation is. After that we will do the same with liberation theology. In our opinion, such an explanation of terms is inevitable for a proper understanding of our proposed African theology of liberation.

1) Inculturation

The concept INCULTURATION is quite problematic. There are scholars who prefer to substitute this concept with diverse terms. Among the terms are:

- INDIGENISATION, implying the localisation and promotion of local Church personnel.
- CONTEXTUALISATION, i.e. theologising within a particular context or situation in life.
- INCARNATION, indicating the concretisation of Christianity. In other words, this is taking the phenomenon of the incarnation of Jesus Christ in our concrete historical existence as Jesus of Nazareth as our perfect model in realising Christianity in every milieu, every single culture, in all times and generations. It is figuratively speaking, putting flesh on Christian message making it thoroughly concrete so that we may understand it but also smell it, touch it, taste it and, indeed, digest it.
- REFORMULATION, meaning understanding and interpreting the Christian doctrines in the thought-forms, mentality and language that is comprehensively understandable.
- ADAPTATION, connoting a kind of intelligent copying. The main concern here is not only the Christianisation of the indigenous cultural values. It deals too with the Africanisation of Christianity.

- INTERCULTURATION, implying intercultural dialogue in doing and living theology as the after-effect of our world becoming a global village and indeed the essence of Christianity as missionary and cultural. As such, the inter relatedness, the interdependence and mutuality of cultures in the continuous endeavour of inculturation is demanded.

Without ignoring these concepts, since each of them has its own contribution as well as limitations, we give preference to the term INCULTURATION. We appreciate it as the one conveying the effort of presenting, interpreting and putting the Christian message in such a way that it germinates, thereby maturing and flourishing in our African people's culture. In other words, according to us, the term INCULTURATION contains and expresses best and most coherently our contemporary trend of understanding, presenting and concretely interpreting Christianity in accordance with our African people's aspirations, needs, thought-forms and mentality. It is more explicit in our approach and effort of confronting the gospel message with our African culture(s).

Dr. J. M. Waliggo is more elaborate in providing an insight into this concept. According to him, and we fully concur with him:

Inculturation means the honest and serious attempt to make Christ and his message of salvation evermore understood by peoples of every culture, locality and time. It means the reformulation of Christian life and doctrine into the very thought-patterns of each people. It is the conviction that Christ and his Good News are even dynamic and challenging to all times and cultures as they become better understood and lived by each people. It is the continuous endeavor to make Christianity truly 'feel at home' in the cultures of each people.

2) Liberation Theology

Various definitions are given by scholars as to what liberation theology is. For our subject matter, it will suffice to present the insights of Gustavo Gutierrez, Clodovis Boff and Leonardo Boff.

G. Gutierrez, who is referred to as the father of liberation theology, defines liberation theology as follows:

It is a theological reflection born of the experience of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society, free and more humane.
He further qualifies it as:

a theology of the liberating transformation of the history of mankind.\(^4\)

Also:

a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is open - in the protest against trampled human dignity, in the struggle against the plunder of the vast majority of people, in liberating love and in the building of a new, just, and fraternal society - to the gift of the kingdom of God.\(^5\)

A closer scrutiny of his epoch making book, namely *A Theology of Liberation* reveals that the term/concept LIBERATION has threefold connotations:

i) emancipation from sin and restoration or re-establishment of life in Christ, ii) freedom from oppressive conditions e.g. socio-economic, political and cultural ones,

iii) and, re-establishment of human authenticity.

L. Boff and C. Boff define liberation theology as:

Reflection on the basis of practice, within the ambit of the vast efforts made by the poor and their allies, seeking inspiration in faith and the gospel for the commitment to fight against poverty and for the integral liberation of all persons and the whole person.\(^6\)

L. Boff gives a more significant definition as follows:

The theology of liberation is nothing other than the theological moment of the experience of Christian faith, when it undertakes to consciously transform a world situation of dependence on the basis of the gospel.\(^7\)

According to us, the above definition of L. Boff is the most comprehensive. We opt for it as our working definition. It contains the two fundamental elements in liberation theology namely, (1) faith and (2) want to transform. He sees liberation theology, in terms of Christianity, as faith seeking to convert remaking the world. The term MOMENT in his definition is highly technical and it means aspect or mediation.

Boff explains that there are four moment/mediations with regard to the methodology of liberation theology. He elaborates them as: 1) the moment of insertion, 2) the moment of theological reflection i.e. hermeneutics, and 4) the moment of pastoral planning.\(^8\)

Featuring analysis

Furthermore, L. Boff enumerates the levels at which liberation theology is done as: 1) popular level. Here ordinary people from existential awareness cry for liberation thereby working emancipation. 2) pastoral level. Here the pastors hear the cry of the poor and in their sermons, homilies, catechesis, counselling ... they react accordingly. 3) professional level. Here the scholars explicate the above in monographs, periodicals, symposia, workshops ... in this stage of erudition. All those levels, as Boff explains, are intertwined in that they have for their common denominator *faith that transforms* history thereby effecting freedom and authenticity.\(^9\)

2. LEVELS OF OPPRESSION

The insights gained from L. Boff’s definition bring to awareness, that while the goal of liberation theology is LIBERATION the point of departure is SITUATION OF OPPRESSION, of marginalisation, of rejection, of dependence, of dehumanisation. . . . We find it worthy now to dwell on the levels of oppression in view of our liberation theology.

It is remarkable to realise that there are numerous levels of oppression or dehumanisation/depersonalisation which violate and indeed distort people’s dignity, worth, and above all freedom to live and believe as they ought to. They hinder proper human integral growth, caricature genuine interpersonal relationships, abuse and misuse human life, adulterate one’s religiosity, cause restlessness and meaninglessness in our society and alienate people from their naturally endowed human authenticity.

P. Frostin deserves credit for enumerating and classifying such levels of oppression, among them, as:

1) economic (rich-poor) levels; 2) classist (capitalist–ploreetariat) level; 3) geographic (North-South) level; 4) sexist (male-female) level; 5) ethnic (e.g., white-black) level; and cultural (dominant -dominated cultures).\(^10\)

These levels of oppression and, of course, other diverse alienating factors give an invaluable insight into the plurality of liberation theology. For instance, the dominant oppressive factor in South Africa is the apartheid system and structures of injustice inculturating an inferiority complex among the Africans. Hence, South African Liberation theologians would focus mainly on the fifth (the ethnic) level of oppression for relevance sake in their black theology, asserting their black consciousness and liberty.\(^11\)

Those of sub-Saharan Africa who are confronted with male chauvinism which enormously subjugates and marginalises women, cultural repugnance, superstitions
and other cultural/religious erroneous elements would dwell basically on the fourth (sexist) and the sixth (cultural) oppressive levels.12 Those of Latin America who are encountered with the negative manipulation of the powerful multinationalities would fundamentally accentuate the first (economic) and second (classist) levels of oppression. Hence their tedious preoccupation with social-economic and political realms in their brand of liberation theology.13 Those of North America whose life situation is explicitly marked by the phenomenon of the black power movement, such as that which has been manifested in the militant struggle of the Black Panthers, would mainly dwell on the fifth (ethnic) and sixth (cultural) levels of oppression as they affirm their black beauty and emancipation from mental slavery in their North American black theology of liberation.14

Those from Europe faced with consumerism, apathy, personal indifference and other after effects of development cum civilisation would focus basically on the third (geographic) and second (classist) levels of oppression.15 Those of Eastern Europe confronted with religio-cultural alienations would mainly stress on the sixth (cultural) and fourth (sexist) levels of oppression.16

Those then are the deep rooted contagious, alienating and oppressive factors effecting useless anxieties all over the world, hopelessness and irreligiosity in our contemporary society. Obviously, these levels of oppression are so intertwined that to dichotomise them as if they are separate entities would amount to missing the whole point. All of them have to be taken seriously in our proposed African theology of liberation.

3. LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND LIBERATION THEOLOGIES

It is valid to infer that liberation theology is the same all over. The verification of this assertion emerges from the fact that liberation theology from wherever has the same point of departure and the same goal. In other words, any liberation theology is triggered from a situation of oppression/deprivation and has for its finality a situation of FREEDOM (or LIBERTY).

Moreover, there is an apparent harmony and concurrence with regards to the themes treated by any liberation theology. Perhaps it is superfluous to elaborate that a critical analysis of any Christian liberation theology shows that the following themes are of great concern:

a) God’s preferential option for the poor.

b) A critical questioning of the prevailing interpretation of the bible i.e. hermeneutics.

d) Conviction and appreciation of the fact that it is people themselves to liberate themselves since they are capable of emancipating themselves for themselves and for others.

e) Suspicion and working for the liberation of (liberation) theology from the shackles and impact of the ideologies of the powerful.

f) Justifiable impatience and bitterness with the oppressive and inauthentic reality confronting one’s society.

Nevertheless, the above should not blind us to the specificity of liberation in diverse regions with peculiar world views, distinctive cultures and particular experiences. The ways a given people understands, presents, formulates and concretely interprets religion (in our case, Christianity) in accordance with their own people’s aspirations, needs, thought-forms, mentality and expectations within own concrete historical existence thereby opting to choose and accentuate particular elements in their own distinctive ways necessarily contributes to their originality and the subsequent contribution. Hence, the qualification: Liberation Theology in Latin America, North American Black Theology, Black Theology from South Africa, Liberation Theology in the rest of Africa, Political Theology in Europe, Liberation Theology in the East... as we saw previously. As such, we talk of Liberation Theologies viewed from these unique confines.

The above observations bring to awareness that the kernel of liberation theology is ONE, hence the qualification Liberation Theology. As has been indicated, this is so because the content i.e. the point of departure and the goal, are one. Yet, as we disclosed it is due to the diverse MANNER in which it is tackled as imbued with corresponding contexts or frameworks. Thus the WAYS of this theological approach make us qualify this orientation as Liberation THEOLOGIES.

The foregoing logically provoke us to ask: what kind of liberation theology would then be viable for our Africa? How may we theologise to emerge with our African originality and creativity for that matter -to refrain our liberation theology from being anybody else’s replica?

4. INCULTURATION-LIBERATION THEOLOGY: OUR AFRICAN PROPOSAL

We elaborated previously that globally and in terms of the CONTENT liberation theology is one and the same all over. Nevertheless, we also explained that with regards to the MANNER of theologising taking into account one’s milieu, people’s world-view, mentality, aspirations... in their concrete historical existence, liberation theology is multiple. Latin American in Latin America,
Germanic in Germany, North American in North America, Asiatic in Asia, European in Europe... And why not African in Africa!

With the above in mind, we propose an African Liberation Theology for specificity's sake. The name we choose to call our proposed approach to theology which takes into account even our African traditional religions and cultures is AFRICAN INCULTURATION-LIBERATION THEOLOGY.

This "new way" of doing liberation theology and accentuates inculturation imbued with African religiosity and cultural wealth as a point of departure for the theology of liberation. Here it should be thoroughly understood that to achieve the desired goal it is not enough to do the theology of inculturation (each such theology is liberation). One must have the explicit intention of taking such an inculturational approach as a starting point for the theology of liberation from socio-economic oppression.

Briefly then, our proposed African approach to liberation theology is as follows:-

a) For the theologian who intends to construct a liberation theology from socio-economic and political oppression one must start from the global cultural and social situation of the country or society in which such oppression is found.

b) One must then elaborate a theology which strives to liberate the oppression starting from the global cultural and social situation with which the socio-economic and political elements are closely linked.

This way of doing liberation theology has various advantages:

i) It necessarily links the inculturation and liberation types of theology.

ii) It attacks the evil of oppression from within, and thus avoids the error of isolating the problem of socio-economic and political oppression from its social and cultural background.

iii) It immediately leads to a theology of integral liberation, and easily avoids the danger of political reduction in theology. Thus if we opt to take christology as our theological theme for our explicitation, a Christology of liberation is constructed in this manner is much less prone to see Christ as nothing but a political revolutionary.

Let us show this by a concrete example. Example of an African inculturation-liberation theology. ("African Inculturation -liberation theology" is the name we propose for our African theology).

- Let us suppose that society Z suffers from socio-economic and political oppression, and one wants to construct a liberation Christology for that society.

These are the steps suggested for such Christology:-

1) One has to study the cultural and social situation of society Z. Suppose that society Z's world-view is basically vitalistic, then one must conclude that their cultural situation is one of the oppression.

2) Analysis of the situation

Such analysis will involve two steps as follows:-

a) Study of the cultural situation: This will be made by means of social anthropology, and will most probably reveal that society Z's world-view is vitalistic.

b) Study of the social situation: This kind of study will involve the analysis of the problem of socio-economic and political oppression in society Z. The problem will be examined in the following manner:

i) in its roots in the North-South relationships.

ii) in the light of society Z's vitalistic world-view. In this latter case, such oppression will appear as hampering not only society Z's socio-economic and political welfare, but also their fullness of life (and personality). Most likely such study will show that similar oppression exists also among the members of society Z.

Once the above analysis has been carried out, one can then proceed to construct a relevant Christology as follows;

3) Suggested Christology

4) Start from cultural situation:

Christ is the fullness of life in the sense of society Z. Hence;

i) He is Liberator of society Z in the sense that He is the highest accomplishment of their understanding of life (analogical approach; liberation for the status quo, as explained above). Here also the members of society Z will discover that they are also oppressors of themselves and others.

ii) Christ is, consequently Liberator of society Z's socio-economic and political oppression, since it is fundamentally opposed to the fullness of life he intends for society Z in an integral way. In this case socio-economic and political oppression will be seen as only one of the evils which attack fullness of life.

Hence, the theologian is easily preserved from socio-political reductionism, and is easily conducted to integral liberation.

b) Suggested practical means:

i) Liberation (conversion) of members of society Z to follow Christ who is fullness of life and, in that way, Liberator. In this manner the members will be prepared for true liberation after external oppression has been vanquished.

ii) Liberation (conversion) of external socio-economic and political oppressors by spiritual (prayers, proclamation of the word of God, good example) and secular means (peaceful means and, as last resort, violent means).
3) Conclusion

Among the advantages of this approach over the one taken by many liberation theologians (especially in Latin America) are as follows:

a) A more comprehensive and realistic approach to liberation, shown by situating the problem in the total cultural and social setting in which it is found.

b) Immediate insistence on conversion of all (oppressor and oppressed) to follow Christ the Liberator (fullness of life) - as the basic condition for true and lasting liberation. (Hence insistence on attack of sin as primary task of liberation movement).

c) Insistence on the fact that everyone, including the poor or oppressed, is an oppressor first of himself/herself and then of others. Other liberation theologians often see only others as sinners and oppressors.

d) Insistence on conversion as a good and necessary preparation for true and lasting liberation when external oppression will have been removed. Other theologians usually do not prepare the poor or oppressed for future liberation.

e) Love of the oppressor, and an effort to liberate him/her.

From these observations and elaborations, it is our contention that this proposed manner of theologising will immediately lead to a theology of integral liberation. It would thus easily avoid the danger of political reduction in theology. Above all, we hope with conviction that this orientation within an African framework, namely AFRICAN INCULTURATION-LIBERATION THEOLOGY, will give specificity to our kind of liberation theology. But then, does this kind of theology have a future?

5. THE FUTURE OF OUR KIND OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

From the foregoing, our concern now is with regard to the future of our kind of liberation theology: Does this liberation theology have a future?

We know that any theology is situational, that theologians theologise in a situation inherent in their milieu since any theological approach is contextual. It has also been established that liberation theology operates within the oppressive situations of un- freedom and inauthenticity. If these situations are absolutely arrested, it follows that that would be the real death of any liberation theology. On the other hand, so long as there are oppressed people, oppressive structures and systems of un- freedom existing in any given community or country, then liberation theology has to be there. It is our contention that this manner of doing theology has a bright future. We verify this assertion with the following factors:

1) Being its aim to emancipate people from sin, free them from any oppressive situation and restore human freedom and authenticity, liberation theology becomes a life-long endeavour. Certain oppressive elements cannot be wholly eliminated once and for all from the society. In any case, history has it that today's oppressed have the potential of turning to be tomorrow's worse oppressors - when one is liberated chances are that one joins the club, and indeed the clique, of the oppressors. Even the elite and the youth are in continuous need of liberation so as to keep understanding and appreciating their own culture, customs and life now that the world has become a kind of "global village."

In so long as oppression, poverty and un- freedom exist - and there is no evidence that these factors will be done away with - liberation theology may be said to have a future. As long as people continue to suffer from all sorts of socio-economic, political and cultural injustices whether from external or from within, as long as there is sexism and male chauvinism, as long as there is racism, as long as people continue to be in bondage of sin and be enslaved in the shackles of useless anxieties and the illusions of hedonism and idolatry, then liberation theology has a future. Indeed, the fact that there is no perfection in humanity, the awareness that situations change bringing more (newer) oppression, thus needing more re-insertion for proper theologisation, that the ideal liberation will be actualised in the eschaton, means that liberation theology has a realistic future down here on earth.

2) A good number of prominent proponents of liberation theology - the Boffs, the Coneys, the Ntshamburis, the Boesaks, the Ouduyyes the Nasimiyus - are young energetic people who are hoped to live long. Through them, the continuity of liberation theology is assured for years to come. They are forceful hard-workers who realise that the work of a theologian does not stop so long as there is un- freedom in the society and such oppressive factors and conditions are endless and "perennial." It becomes a life long project.

They are scholars well aware that human beings change with time and erupting circumstances. And that as committed theologians, they have to keep addressing people in people's existing/changing situations, prevailing ideologies and current world-views. The impact they are having on younger thinkers will guarantee the perpetual endurance of this approach of theologising even after their departure. The major questions they will keep asking e.g. is yesterday's inculturation/liberation theology relevant for today's and tomorrow's generations - will constantly and consistently keep liberating yesterday's liberation theology to suit today's and today's to suit the future's.

3) By its very essence, Christianity is liberating. It ultimately aims at restoring authenticity to human beings saving/redeeming them as well as divinising them. In this way, wherever Christianity is, liberation theology is there too. Consequently, since Christianity endures so will liberation theology.
Moreover, the mushrooming of independent Churches breaking from the mainstream Churches will continue to need liberation theology to reunite with the mainstream Churches. The members of both the mainstream Churches and the breakaway Churches will be bogged down with questions like: Why do splinter religious away ones will be bogged down with questions like: Why do splinter religious away ones will be bogged down with questions like: Why do splinter religious away ones will be bogged down with questions like: Why do splinter religious away ones will be bogged down with questions like: Why do splinter religious away ones will be bogged down with questions like: Why do splinter religious away ones will be bogged down with questions like: Why do splinter religious away ones will be bogged down with questions like: Why do splinter religious away ones will be bogged down with questions like: Why do splinter religious away ones will be bogged down with questions like: Why do splinter religious away ones will be bogged down with questions like: Why do splinter religious away ones will be bogged down with questions like: Why do splinter religious away ones will 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The Church will keep accusing dictatorial regimes of being the stumbling block in people's freedom under the guise of state security abusing their human rights. The state will keep hitting back by indicating the Church's paternalism leadership. As long as these kinds of unfreedom exist, the future of liberation theologian is indispensable. So long as democratic principles are not upheld, if tyrants continue to be bred, then liberation theology is not going to end tomorrow. It will endure and keep surviving.

All these factors verify adequately that our African inculturated liberation theology has a bright near future.

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REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

4. Ibid., p. 15.
5. Ibid., p. 15.


8. For their explanations, we refer you to L. Boff and C. Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, pp. 22ff.


