

Liberation Theology

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Version 1.0 | Published 1 May 2026 | DOI <https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-113042>

Other language version: [Befreiungstheologie \(Deutsch\)](#)

Liberation theology is a theological and social movement. In fact, it is more accurate to describe it as a variety of movements that developed, first, among Christian communities, but that soon found expression in all major religious traditions during the second half of the 20th century. “Liberation theology” therefore is not a uniform school of thought or movement. Rather, liberation theology is the name given to a family of viewpoints that gather around certain basic tenets or orienting principles, some of which are shared by nonreligious movements of liberation as well. Despite their differences, most theologies of liberation share the following four orienting principles.

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Editorial Note

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1. Four Orienting Principles

The first principle is the radical opposition to all forms of oppression. Historically, in Latin America, this started with the fight to eradicate poverty in the mid-1960s. In the United States, almost at the same time, the primary concern was the problem of anti-black racism. The leading figures of this first generation were Gustavo Gutiérrez ^{GND} and James H. Cone ^{GND}, respectively. But over time the radical opposition to oppression became a larger and international struggle that included issues like gender, sexual orientation, the rights of nonhuman animals, and the care for the environment. With time this became a struggle that exceeded the world of the Christian faith and extended to almost all religious confessions, despite their different interpretations of the theological component of liberation.

The second principle is the formation of a movement of solidarity with and among the oppressed in the struggle for emancipation and social justice. Even though many leaders of the movement were not poor, the majority belonged to the popular and impoverished classes who, through their own process of discernment and organizing, decided to fight collectively for a life with human dignity and access to basic social goods. Soon enough this collective movement became global as well. Through gatherings of theologians and organizers, starting in the early-1970s, a global network of solidarity developed. It has only grown farther, aided by the opportunities created by the internet, fast-speed travel, and social media, and catalyzed by the persistence of poverty and increasing inequality.

The third principle is the identification of different forms of structural oppression or institutional violence, and the correlative call for structural and institutional change. Without a doubt, liberation theology's most decisive contribution is its faith-based advocacy for systemic social change, even if this by no means excludes the importance of charitable work and individual acts of generosity. Yet the growing awareness among the poor (cf. art. Poverty) and marginalized (cf. art. Marginalization) that injustice was not fate, but the result of human choices led to the conviction that the solutions would require participation in the political process in a variety of creative ways: through churches, running for elected office, policy proposals, nonprofits, human rights advocacy, and so on. Both Gustavo Gutiérrez ^{GND} and James H. Cone ^{GND}, together with many of their colleagues, provided the initial theological resources to discern how to insert oneself in the political realm while remaining loyal to one's faith.

The fourth and final principle is the theological roots of the movement. Put briefly, liberation theology argues that opting for the poor and marginalized, and against their oppression, are essential tenets of the Christian faith. For believers (cf. art. Faith) influenced by liberation theology, this option is a theological, faith-based commitment, grounded on the conviction that the liberation of the oppressed is not merely a political or moral obligation but rather one of the most fundamental forms of expression of divine love and justice. The distinctiveness of liberation theology vis-à-vis other movements of liberation lies in this. The religious faith of the followers of the movement is their strongest source of motivation and becomes also a place of spiritual nurturing in the struggle for a better life. Of course, the degree to which their faith shapes their politics varies, but what is undeniable is that their religious values are central to their political commitments.

2. History

The liberation theology movement had its most impactful initial source in the Latin American church. Such impact is partly due to the global presence of the Catholic Church (which allowed the rapid spread of the movement), to the organizational strength of Catholicism in Latin America, and to the fact that most liberation theologians were not academics, but church leaders. This Latin American trajectory of liberation theology is the focus of this article.

In this sense, the origins of the movement can be found in the global changes of Catholicism during the 20th century, but especially in the sweeping transformations that ensued after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Vatican II became a moment of substantial change in which the Catholic Church freely embraced the values of democracy, ecumenism, and honest and horizontal dialogue with society, after centuries of – sometimes even violent – opposition to these values. Of course, such an embrace was not universal and did not lack in tensions and contradictions, but it did elicit substantial waves of reform in global Catholicism. One of the key areas of substantial change was Latin America.

As it is well documented, many of the Latin American bishops in attendance at Vatican II took the creative energies of the council to their regions of origin. The experiences of political violence and social mobilization in the region, together with the impetus of Vatican II led to the decisive Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín, Colombia (1968). Most theologians in the Catholic world take the conference of Medellín as one of the main landmarks in the emergence of liberation theology. It is worth noting that Gustavo Gutiérrez ^{GND} was the most influential theological figure in Medellín, as the careful study of Christian Smith ^{GND}, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology*, demonstrates.

Only a few years after the Medellín conference, Gutiérrez wrote *A Theology of Liberation* (published in 1971 in Spanish; 1973 in English) as the first and most representative theological articulation of the Latin American experience in the faith-based struggle for social justice. After the publication of *A Theology of Liberation*, the movement spread significantly beyond Latin America. Parallel developments in the United States with the development of Black liberation theology, and subsequent developments around the globe made of liberation theology a true international intellectual and social movement whose strength is visible still today.

3. Developments

Some of those key developments are worth noting, precisely for their critical and productive relationship with the first generation of liberation theologians. Latin American feminist liberation theology developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a critical response to liberation theology done almost exclusively by men. Acknowledging the undeniable contributions of liberation theology, feminist liberation theology criticized the lack of attention to the situation of women within the world of poverty and oppression. One of the founding texts of this movement is María Pilar Aquino ^{GND}, *Our Cry for Life* (1992). Another important stream of liberation theology is Latino theology in the United States. One of its central figures, Virgilio P. Elizondo ^{GND}, attended the Medellín conference and was close to and deeply influenced by Gutiérrez. Latino theologians, however, expanded the understanding of poverty initially developed by liberation theologians, focusing instead on the complexities of the process of migration and the need to affirm the dignity of both the people and the culture of those in the Latin American diaspora. Among the key texts of Latino theology, we can count Elizondo's *Galilean Journey* (1983) and Roberto S. Goizueta's ^{GND} *Caminemos con Jesús* (1995). *Mujerista* theology developed out of the Latino theology tradition as a form of immanent critique, similar to that of feminist theology in Latin America. The key text here is Ada María Isasi-Díaz's ^{GND} *En la lucha* (1993). Lastly, the Queer theology of Marcella Althaus-Reid ^{GND} emerged also from a critical engagement with Latin American liberation theology, as an invitation to take the body and sexual desire seriously in the production of theological ideas. *Indecent Theology* (2000) is Althaus-Reid's landmark contribution. Many other streams of liberation theology continue emerging in critical dialogue with the ideas of the founding generation, as a clear testimony to the substantial innovations produced by this tradition and to the vitality of their ideas.

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Citation Style

Zegarra, Raúl E.: „Liberation Theology“, Version 1.0, in: Online Lexicon for Systematic Theology, ISSN 3052-685X, 1 May 2026. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-113042>

Metadata

DOI	https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-113042
Creative Commons Licence Type	Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs CC BY-NC-ND (4.0)
peer reviewed by	Rudolf von Sinner
Collection of Articles	Systematic Theology
Index Theologicus (IxTheo)	Justice , Oppression , Political Theology , Racism , Roman Catholic Church , Solidarity , Violence
Subject Headings (LOC)	Justice , Oppression , Political Theology , Racism , Roman Catholic Church , Solidarity , Violence

Keyword	<u>Justice</u> , <u>Oppression</u> , <u>Political Theology</u> , <u>Racism</u> , <u>Roman Catholic Church</u> , <u>Solidarity</u> , <u>Violence</u>
Mentioned People	<u>Marcella Althaus-Reid</u> , <u>María Pilar Aquino</u> , <u>James H. Cone</u> , <u>Virgilio P. Elizondo</u> , <u>Roberto S. Goizueta</u> , <u>Gustavo Gutiérrez</u> , <u>Ada María Isasi-Díaz</u> , <u>Christian Smith</u>

KEYWORDS

- Justice
- Oppression
- Political Theology
- Racism
- Roman Catholic Church
- Solidarity
- Violence