

Book Review: Liberation Theology

By Emilio A. Nuñez. Translated by Paul E. Sywulka. Moody Press 820 N. LaSalle Drive, Chicago, Ill 60610 (1985). 248 pp. \$15.95. Reviewed by Kenneth B. Mulholland, Columbia Biblical Seminary and School of Missions

Here is Emilio Nuñez's long-awaited exposition and evaluation of Latin American liberation theology from an evangelical perspective.

One of the most respected evangelical theologians in Latin America, Nuñez is well qualified to author this volume. For many years Nuñez has been the professor of systematic and contemporary theology at the Central American Theological Seminary in Guatemala City. A world-class theologian, he helped found the Latin American Theological Fraternity, and serves as a member of the Lausanne Continuation Committee and the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship. Yet he has never lost touch with the poor. He preaches and teaches not only at international gatherings, but also in the humble congregations that dot Central America.

The book is cogently organized, clearly written, and well translated. It is organized into four parts followed by a concluding chapter. The first part treats the historical and social context out of which liberation theology arose in Latin America. In the second part, Nuñez outlines the development of this theology by tracing its influence by European theologies, the Church and Society in Latin America (ISAL) movement, and the New Catholicism. Part three stresses the methodology of liberation theology as the key to understanding its significance. The fourth part focuses on three themes fundamental to liberation theology: salvation and liberation; Jesus the Liberator; and ecclesiology of liberation.

Nuñez concludes with an all-too-brief response to liberation theology in which he calls for an evangelical theology that is "*Biblical* in its foundations, *ecclesiastical* in its close relationship to the community of faith, *pastoral* in its attempt to be orientating voice for the people of God, *contextualized* with regard to that which is social and cultural, and *missionary* in its purpose to reach with the gospel those who are not Christians" (p. 280).

This book has several significant strengths. First, it is well documented and accurate. Nuñez knows what he is writing about. He is a keen student of Roman Catholic theology and is acquainted with a wide spectrum of liberation thinkers. He communicates a deep sense of fairness and respect, even empathy, toward those with whom he disagrees. One finds few caricatures of "straw men" in his book.

Second, the book does justice to the background of liberation theology. In my judgment, Nuñez correctly assesses the input of both radical Protestant thought filtered through ISAL, and contemporary Roman Catholic theology emanating from Vatican II. Nuñez argues that Latin American liberation theology is clearly European in its Marxist presuppositions.

Third, Nuñez recognizes that the distinguishing feature of liberation theology lies in its theological method. Thus, he avoids a common error into which many evangelicals fall: evaluating liberation theologies by a doctrine-by-doctrine comparison with orthodox theology, without realizing that liberation theologians arrive at their conclusions because of their methodology. The point of departure for liberation theology is not the text of the Scriptures, but the situation of poverty and exploitation in Latin America.

Assuming that Marxist analysis provides the best framework for understanding their situation, liberation theologians maintain that poverty and underdevelopment are the products of economic dependence on the United States and Europe. International capitalism is the culprit and must be replaced by a genuinely Latin American Socialism, which in turn will result in a creation of a new man and the construction of a new society. Theology emerges as Christians committed to the transformation of social structures reflect on their commitment in the light of faith.

Fourth, rather than opt for a superficial survey, Nuñez wisely selects three crucial themes of liberation theology for detailed comment. His treatment of salvation and liberation draws heavily on the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez, who views salvation as “social, universal, intra-historical, eschatological, and human” (p. 205).

In his exposition of Jesus as liberator, Nuñez views the writings of Leonard Boff and Jon Sobrino as more “a Christology of human divine revelation” (p. 235).

His examination of ecclesiological thought in liberation theology explains how the church’s mission has been redefined to “opt for the cause of the poor, to denounce the injustice of the oppressors, to announce the kingdom of God in order to ‘conscientize and politicize’ the oppressors and to participate directly in liberating praxis with a view toward establishing a socialist society” (p. 273).

Despite its many strengths, this book is not without some weaknesses.

First, the book assumes a deeper understanding of the Latin American reality than most North American students possess. While perfectly comprehensible to the person who lives in Latin America, the many detailed references of Latin American history, movements, personalities, and issues may well prove confusing to the average North American seminary student.

Second, the book is long on description, but short on prescription. Nuñez’s analysis of liberation theology is detailed and accurate. Nevertheless, apart from some guidelines scattered throughout the book and concentrated at the end, a definitive and constructive statement of Latin American evangelical theology still remains to be written.

Also, if Nuñez is to be helpful to Latin Americans, he should limit his overuse of the word “conservative evangelical,” because that term often conjures up in the Latin American mind images of theology inextricably tied to North American political

conservatism. Most thoughtful Latin Americans desire constructive changes in their social, economic, political, and religious structures, not a buttressing of the *status quo*.

Despite these shortcomings, this is an eminently worthwhile book, the best on the subject from an evangelical perspective. It ought to be read by every missionary to Latin America, as well as by all who seek to interact with integrity regarding current theological developments in the Two-Third's World.

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Liberation theology, religious movement arising in late 20th-century Roman Catholicism and centred in Latin America. It sought to apply religious faith by aiding the poor and oppressed through involvement in political and civic affairs. It stressed both heightened awareness of the "sinful." Thank you for your feedback. Our editors will review what you've submitted and determine whether to revise the article. Join Britannica's Publishing Partner Program and our community of experts to gain a global audience for your work! Share. SHARE. Facebook Twitter. Liberation theology. Roman Catholicism. Written By: The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. See Article History. Liberation theology is a synthesis of Christian theology and socio-economic analyses, often based in far-left politics, particularly Marxism, that emphasizes "social concern for the poor and political liberation for oppressed peoples." In the 1950s and the 1960s, liberation theology was the political praxis of Latin American theologians, such as Gustavo Guti rrez of Peru, Leonardo Boff of Brazil, Juan Luis Segundo of Uruguay, and Jon Sobrino of Spain, who popularized the phrase "Preferential option