LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND THE SOCIAL GOSPEL: VARIATIONS ON A THEME

T. HOWLAND SANKS, S.J.

Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley

THE LATIN AMERICAN liberation theologians are at pains to emphasize that they are theologizing out of and for a very particular social and cultural context and that in some sense this context provides a unique perspective from which to view and interpret the gospel. They feel, and I think rightly so, that their theology is more firmly rooted in the historical reality of Latin America than was (or is) what they call "academic" theology, by which they usually mean the European theology in which most of them were trained not too long ago. The liberation theologians are acutely aware that any theology is conditioned by its social context, and they warn us against trying simply to transpose Latin American liberation theology to a North American or other localized context. I could not agree more, although, as I have pointed out previously, I think we in North America have something to learn from their methodology.[1]

Not only should we recognize the fact that theology is necessarily conditioned by its social situation, but I wish to affirm that it ought to be so conditioned. A theology that does not take sufficient account of the "plausibility structures" of the society in which and for which it is intended to function will be literally incredible. If theology is to be vital, it must be responsive to the social, economic, and political factors which are "real" for that society. This implies that theology is, to some extent, determined or conditioned by those social factors.

This affirmation of the particularity of every theology needs to be balanced by a historical awareness which is wider than the particular social context. That is to say, no theology and no social context is so unique, so particular, that it has nothing in common with any other theology or any other experience of the Christian community through the ages.

Is the liberation theology emerging from Latin America so unique, so particularized, that it defies comparison with any other previous Christian experience or previous theology? The North American theologian who studies Latin American theology seriously cannot help but be reminded of an earlier movement in North America: the "Social Gospel" movement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. At least prima facie there are enough similarities to warrant a closer look. As a step in that

[1] T. Howland Sanks and Brian H. Smith, "Liberation Ecclesiology: Praxis, Theory, Praxis," *TS* 38 (1977) 3–38.

direction, I propose to examine a representative of each of these theologies: Gustavo Gutiérrez and Walter Rauschenbusch.

I

It is too early in the history of the Latin American liberation theologies to say who is *the* outstanding or most influential of all the theologians in that group, but it is fair to say that Gutiérrez is at least representative. His major work, *A Theology of Liberation*, was one of the earlier ones to be published (1971) and translated into English (1973), and is a balanced and fairly comprehensive presentation of liberation theology. There are, of course, other representatives, but for our purposes it is not necessary to survey them all.[2]

Gutiérrez' basic purpose is "to reconsider the great themes of the Christian life within the radically changed perspective ... born of the experience of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human."[3] His point of departure for such a reconsideration is the "questions posed by the social praxis in the process of liberation as well as by the participation of the Christian community in this process within the Latin American context."[4] His theological reflection, then, begins with an analysis of the realities of the Latin American situation and the attempt to change the social, economic, and political institutions.[4a] He finds that the "notion of dependence emerges as the key element in the interpretation of the Latin American reality." The attempt to free people (both individually and as a group) from dependence on another is what he means by "liberation." Liberation,

[2] See, e.g., the five volumes of Juan Luis Segundo in the series *Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973 ff.); José Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Phila.: Fortress, 1975); Enrique Dussell, *History and the Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis 1976); Claude Geffré and Gustavo Gutiérrez, eds., *The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith* (Concilium 96; New York: Herder and Herder, 1974); Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978); Hugo Assmann, *Theology for a Nomad Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976); Ignacio Ellacuria, *Freedom Made Flesh* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976); Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976); Alfred T. Hennelly, *Theologies in Conflict* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979).—Although Gutiérrez is certainly representative and a pioneer, not all liberation theologians agree with him on all points, and liberation theology has continued to develop since he wrote this volume. The emergence of "national security" states has led some to adopt some form of socialism and to identify liberation theology with the ideology of Marxism (e.g., Assmann and Dussell). For a brief survey of these developments since Medellín, cf. Jon Sobrino, "The Significance of Puebla for the Catholic Church in Latin America", in *Puebla and Beyond* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979) 289–92, and Hennelly, *Theologies in Conflict* 23–49.

[3] Gustavo Gutiérrez, A *Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973) ix.

[4] Ibid. 143.

[4a] For a brief review of the Latin American social context, cf. Sanks and Smith, "Liberation Ecclesiology" 5–7.

however, has a more profound meaning than just social, economic, and political liberation; it implies "liberation from all that limits or keeps man from self-fulfillment, liberation from all impediments to the exercise of his freedom," as well as "assuming conscious responsibility for his own destiny." Finally, on the theological level, liberation implies Christ, the Savior, freeing man from sin, "which is the ultimate root of all disruption of friendship and of all injustice and oppression."[5]

The usual theological word for liberation is salvation, and Gutiérrez sees the doctrine of salvation as central to Christianity and in need of reconsideration in the light of the Latin American situation. He does not make a simple identification of the theological notion of salvation with the historical process of liberation of men and women, but he does see the two as integrally related. Nor is salvation merely a matter between the individual and God. Rather, "men are called to meet the Lord insofar as they constitute a community, a people." He also emphasizes the universal salvific will of God and sees the process of salvation as something intrahistorical. Salvation "is not something other-worldly, in regard to which the present life is merely a test." "Salvation—the communion of men with God and the communion of men among themselves—is something which embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its fullness in Christ.... "[6] Hence the mission of the Church is determined more by the political context of the society in which it concretely exists than by "intra-ecclesiastical problems." There is a solidarity of the Church with the world, and the frontiers between the two are fluid in both directions. Salvation history is not something apart from human history; it is "the very heart of human history." "Salvation embraces all men and the whole man: the liberating action of Christ ... is at the heart of the historical current of humanity; the struggle for a just society is in its own right very much a part of salvation history."[7]

There is an intimate relationship between salvation (or liberation) from sin and the liberation of man throughout history, including the political level. "One is not present without the others, but they are distinct; they are all part of a single, all-encompassing salvific process, but they are to be found at different levels." Gutiérrez does not collapse political liberation or the work of humanizing man's social situation into the coming of the kingdom of God, as is sometimes suggested.

The growth of the kingdom is a process which occurs historically in liberation, insofar as liberation means a greater fulfillment of man. Liberation is a precondition for the new societv, but this is not all it is. While liberation is implemented in liberating historical events, it also denounces their limitations and ambiguities,

[5] *A Theology of Liberation* 36-37.

[6] Ibid. 151.

[7] Ibid. 168.

proclaims their fulfillment, and impels them effectively towards total communion. This is not an identification. Without liberating historical events, there would be no growth of the kingdom. But the process of liberation will not have conquered the very roots of oppression and the exploitation of man without the coming of the kingdom, which is above all a gift.[8]

This integral relationship between liberation from sin and political, social, and economic liberation has obvious consequences for the self-understanding of the Church and its mission. This is the second theological theme that Gutiérrez reconsiders.

The Church reconsidered in the light of this integral relationship must cease to consider itself as the exclusive place of salvation and must orient itself toward a new and radical service of people.[9] This is an "uncentering" of the Church. The Church is not the sun around which all else revolves. The Church does not exist for itself but "for others." Its function is to be a sign, and more than a sign, a sacrament of salvation for all, not only for those within its visible institutional structure. "Through the people who explicitly accept his Word, the Lord reveals the world to itself. He rescues it from anonymity and enables it to know the ultimate meaning of its historical future and the value of every human act." Gutiérrez quotes Teilhard's phrase that the Church is the "reflectively Christified portion of the world." It is not "nonworld" but the conscious part of the world that *knows* the plan of salvation for all. It is the Church's function to manifest this possibility of communion among men and of men with God in its life and actions. To celebrate this kind of communion in the Eucharist without a "real commitment against exploitation and alienation and for a society of solidarity and justice" would be an empty action.[10] The Church must necessarily play a role in the historical context in which it finds itself. In Latin America at present, Gutiérrez says, this means taking a clear position for social justice and against the established order. The Church's position is never neutral, and any "claim to noninvolvement in politics ... is nothing but a subterfuge to keep things as they are."[11]

A third significant theme which Gutiérrez reconsiders in his theology of liberation is that of the "eschatological promises." Relying on recent biblical scholarship, he argues that the Bible is essentially a book of promise. From Abraham down through the prophets and the formation of the kingdom of Israel, the completion of the old covenant and the revelation of a new covenant, the promise of God's action in the future as

[8] Ibid. 177. Schubert Ogden argues that the term "liberation" is systematically ambiguous and does not sufficiently distinguish between the emancipative work of God and his redemptive work. The ambiguity of the term does not mean that Gutiérrez identifies the kingdom of God with any liberating historical events. Cf. Schubert Ogden, *Faith and Freedom: Toward a Theology of Liberation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979) esp. chap. 3.

[9] *A Theology of Liberation* 256 ff.

[10] Ibid. 265.

[11] Ibid. 256.

well as in the present is a constant and consistent theme. The tendency in some recent theology has been to "spiritualize" the meaning of the eschatological promises, to have reference only to "another order," implying a dichotomy between the "temporal" and the "spiritual" realms. This kind of dualistic thinking is foreign to both the biblical and our present mentality. The eschatological promises are intrahistorical realities: "The grace-sin conflict, the coming of the kingdom, and the expectation of the parousia are also necessarily and inevitably historical, temporal, earthly, social, and material realities.... A poorly understood spiritualization has often made us forget the human consequences of the eschatological promises and the power to transform unjust social structures which they imply. The elimination of misery and exploitation is a sign of the coming of the kingdom."[12]

The fulfilling of the eschatological promises throughout history does not mean, however, that they can be identified with any one or other social reality. While the struggle against injustice may be a sign of the kingdom, the final coming of the kingdom will mark an end to history. This realization leads to a "permanent detachment." The theology of liberation is sometimes accused of confusing the kingdom of God with a particular social strategy or political option. Gutiérrez clearly avoids this pitfall.

For Gutiérrez, Jesus is not seen as a Zealot or primarily as a political revolutionary, but his life and death and the totality of the gospel message do have political consequences. Jesus, by freeing men from sin, attacks the roots of the unjust social order. "The life and preaching of Jesus postulate the unceasing search for a new kind of man in a qualitatively different society.... The Gospel does not get its political dimension from one or another particular option, but from the very nucleus of its message ... the kingdom as 'the end of domination of man over man; it is a kingdom of contradiction to the established powers and on behalf of man.' "[13]

Much more could be said about the theology of liberation as presented by Gutiérrez, but it should be clear by now that this is a theology directed toward *action* in the political, economic, and social spheres. Gutiérrez says in his concluding remarks: "if theological reflection does not vitalize the action of the Christian community in the world by making its commitment to charity fuller and more radical ..., then this theological reflection will have been of little value," and " ... all the political theologies, the theologies of hope, of revolution, and of liberation, are not worth one act of genuine solidarity with exploited social classes."[14] While the theology itself is critical reflection, it does not stop with reflecting,

[12] Ibid. 167. [13] Ibid. 231. [14] Ibid. 307.

"but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed."[15]

These themes of the centrality of the kingdom to the Christian message, of the continuity between the eschatological kingdom and the present historical order, of sin as a social and political rather than just an individual matter between God and man, of salvation as liberation, of the uncentering of the Church and its role in the political and social order, of the eschatological promises as having significance for the here and now—all these themes can be found in the other liberation theologians, with varying emphases and qualifications. It should be obvious that these themes reflect the understanding of the present Latin American situation, where injustice and oppression are the dominant characteristics. What is of interest to us here is that exactly the same themes can be found in a volume written fifty years before Gutiérrez on a different continent, but where the social situation was also diagnosed as predominantly one of injustice and oppression. Let us now turn to that work of Walter Rauschenbusch.

II

The Social Gospel was fundamentally a social movement rather than a theological one. It developed a theology only gradually; indeed, the outstanding theologian of the Social Gospel, Walter Rauschenbusch, came only at the end of the movement.[16] The Social Gospel has been characterized by its leading historian as "American Protestantism's response to the challenge of modern industrial society." This new industrial society was "characterized by the rise of large-scale production units that drew together vast proletarian populations in hastily built, overcrowded cities."[17] During this period in the United States the central questions were those concerning capital and labor. Hopkins describes the social context of the times:

> Technological unemployment, immigration, and other factors combined by 1900 to create a standing army of a million unemployed whereas in 1870 the labor supply had been inadequate. The demands of industry brought millions from the farms and from the old world to the new and crowded cities, expanding the working classes fivefold. Between 1860 and 1890 the national wealth increased from sixteen to seventy-eight and one half billions of dollars, more than half of

[15] Ibid. 22.

[16] Ronald C. White Jr. and C. Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1976) xvi, and Robert T. Handy, ed., *The Social Gospel in America* (New York: Oxford University, 1966), citing Reinhold Niebuhr, who called Rauschenbusch "the most brilliant and generally satisfying exponent" of the Social Gospel (253).

[17] Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism 1865–1915* (New Haven: Yale University, 1940) 318.

which was held by some forty thousand families or one third of one percent of the population. But in the decade 1870–80 real wages, which had never been above the bare subsistence level, had declined from an average of $400 to $300, forcing children to premature labor and driving women to the factories beside the men. The American industrial revolution, in the process of creating wealth such as the world had never seen or dreamed of, produced also a sullen proletariat resentful of the poverty it had obtained as its share of the bounty, and the republic of Jefferson and Jackson now became the scene of the most embittered class wars and the most glaring social contrasts modern times had seen.[18]

It was out of such a social context that the theology of the Social Gospel emerged.

The Social Gospel, however, did not come out of the theologian's study nor from the academy, but from the practical experience of Protestant ministers working in urban situations and realizing that the individualistic piety and preaching for which they had been trained was of little help in dealing with the urban poor. They realized that the misery of those to whom they were ministering was not caused merely by their individual weakness and sinfulness, but by the system itself. Hence they began to turn their attention to the social structures and institutions that gave rise to these conditions. Only gradually did they feel the need to reinterpret their Christianity to make some sense out of the needs rooted in their pastoral experience. "We have a social Gospel. We need a systematic theology large enough to match it and vital enough to back it."[19]

Since our purpose is to examine and compare one representative of the Social Gospel theology, it is not necessary to survey the entire movement. That has been adequately done, and recently redone by the historians already cited.[20] Again, it will suffice for our purposes to examine the theology of the Social Gospel as presented by its most outstanding and brilliant exponent, Walter Rauschenbusch.[21]

Walter Rauschenbusch was born in Rochester, New York, in 1861 and educated there and in Germany. Although coming from a long line of Lutheran pastors, his father became a Baptist, and Rauschenbusch was named pastor of a German Baptist parish in the Hell's Kitchen section of New York City in 1886. It was there that his experience of an endless procession of men "out of work, out of clothes, out of shoes, and out of

[18] Ibid. 79–80.

[19] Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Abingdon, 1917) 1.

[20] In addition to the volumes already cited, see also Paul A. Carter, *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1956).

[21] Hopkins, *Rise of the Social Gospel* 215–16; White and Hopkins, *Social Gospel* 36; Handy, *Social Gospel in America* 253. All affirm this pre-eminence of Rauschenbusch. Other major figures earlier in the movement were Josiah Strong, Washington Gladden, Richard Ely, Shailer Matthews, George D. Herron—to mention just the more illustrious.

hope," combined with the influence of Henry George, author of *Progress and Poverty*, awakened his social consciousness. On leave from the parish in 1891, Rauschenbusch studied in England and Germany, where he read Marx and Tolstoi and deepened his knowledge of the New Testament. Due to increasing deafness, he left the pastoral ministry and returned to Rochester Theological Seminary, where he taught in the German department and soon became professor of church history, a post he held until his death in 1918. It was not until the publication of his first major book, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, in 1907 that he became the recognized leader of the Social Gospel movement. Subsequently he wrote *For God and the People: Prayers of the Social Awakening* in 1910, and *Christianizing the Social Order* in 1912. But his last and most important book is the one that finally gave the Social Gospel its own theology and remains the epitome of the movement's thinking, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 1917.[22]

A Theology for the Social Gospel is written at the end of Rauschenbusch's life, but also the end of the Social Gospel movement as it has been generally considered.[23] Hence Rauschenbusch is looking back over the movement and justifying and defending it against some of the criticisms already voiced. He is anxious to show that the Social Gospel is really "neither alien nor novel" to traditional Christianity, but is rather an authentic reading of the Bible. Further, he is convinced that the Social Gospel is a "permanent addition" and a new stage in "the development of the Christian religion" and "the most important ethical and spiritual movement in the modern world" on the part of Christians.[24]

Among the theological roots of the Social Gospel, Rauschenbusch cites Schleiermacher, Rothe, Ritschl, Herrmann, and Troeltsch from Germany, and F. D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley from Great Britain as "theological prophets who developed a solidaristic conception of Christianity" and faced the relationship between systematic theology and the social task of Christianity.[25] These men laid the basis for overcoming the excessively individualistic interpretation of Christianity from which most of Protestant theology then suffered. From the secular side, Rauschenbusch cites the belief in the universal reign of law, the doctrine of

[22] For a fuller discussion of Rauschenbusch's life and work and the influences upon him, cf. Hopkins, *Rise of the Social Gospel*, chap. 13; Handy, *Social Gospel in America* 253–63; White and Hopkins, *Social Gospel*, chaps. 5 and 21.

[23] The general thesis of White and Hopkins is that the Social Gospel should be redefined in terms of the continuing quest for social justice that has persisted through and after neo-orthodoxy and has manifested itself again in the civil-rights movement (Rauschenbusch influenced Martin Luther King Jr.; cf. White and Hopkins, *Social Gospel* 273–82) and on into the sixties and seventies, and really is a continuing thread in American Christianity.

[24] Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* 2–4.

[25] Ibid. 27–29.

evolution, the control of nature by man, and the value of education and liberty as being "the most influential convictions of modern life" that "have deeply modified our religious thought."[26] These influences have combined to restore the doctrine of the kingdom of God, which was most important with Jesus and the prophets but which had fallen into desuetude with an increasingly individualistic interpretation of sin and redemption. Hence it is these three theological doctrines on which the Social Gospel has the most impact. Rauschenbusch admits that the Social Gospel has no contribution to make on "the more speculative doctrines"—"its interests lie on earth, within the social relations of the life that now is."[27]

In the theology of the Social Gospel the consciousness of sin is not diminished, but the emphasis is shifted to different classes of sin: "Attention is concentrated on questions of public morality, on wrongs done by whole classes or professions of men, on sins which enervate and submerge entire mill towns or agricultural states." For Rauschenbusch, sin is essentially selfishness rather than essentially rebellion against God, and is not "a private transaction between the sinner and God."[28] "The sinful mind, then, is the un-social and anti-social mind." Among the large-scale sins from which the race suffers, we are "submerged under despotic government, under war and militarism, under landlordism, and under predatory industry and finance."[29]

A clear realization of the nature of sin, however, depends on a clear vision of the kingdom of God, which stands in contrast and conflict with the kingdom of evil. When an awareness of the reign of God is lacking, then there is a corresponding insensitivity to social and public sins which frustrate the kingdom.[30] Hence a fundamental aim of the theology of the Social Gospel is a restoration of the doctrine of the kingdom of God to its primary and central place.[31]

Rauschenbusch goes so far as to say that the doctrine of the kingdom of God "is itself the social gospel." By this he means that the distinctive contribution of the Social Gospel theology is to understand salvation not just in terms of the individual but in terms of establishing a community of righteousness here and now. "The kingdom of God is humanity organized according to the will of God." It exists both in the present and the future. It is not merely an eschatological reality but is "always coming, always pressing in on the present, always big with possibility, and always inviting immediate action." The kingdom of God implies the progressive reign of love in human affairs, and the ethical implications of this require the redemption of social life from religious bigotry, from all forms of

[26] Ibid. 23; see also Handy, *Social Gospel in America* 254.

[27] Rauschenbusch 31.

[28] Ibid. 47–48.

[29] Ibid. 53.

[30] Ibid. 77.

[31] Ibid. 131.

slavery in which human beings are treated as mere means, the redemption of society from political autocracies and economic oligarchies, the redemption of society from private property in the natural resources of the earth and from any condition in industry which makes monopoly profits possible.[32]

Rauschenbusch also points out that the Church exists for the kingdom, not vice versa: "the institutions of the Church, its activities, its worship, and its theology must in the long run be tested by its effectiveness in creating the kingdom of God." And again, "The kingdom of God is not confined within the limits of the Church and its activities. It embraces the whole of human life. It is the Christian transfiguration of the social order."[33] The Social Gospel sees the kingdom of God "in the flow of history, in the clash of economic forces and social classes, in the rise and fall of despotisms and forms of enslavement, in the rise of new value-judgments and fresh canons of moral taste and sentiment, or the elevation or decline of moral standards ... the social gospel is always historically minded."[34]

Having established the social nature of sin and of salvation, and the intrinsic relationship of the kingdom of God to the redemption of society from various social ills, the theology of the Social Gospel proceeds to reinterpret the other major Christian doctrines: Christology, the doctrine of God, of the Holy Spirit and inspiration, the sacraments, eschatology, and the atonement.

Briefly, then, Christ is understood as the one "who set in motion the historical forces of redemption which are to overthrow the kingdom of evil."[35] It is definitely an ascending Christology, "basing the divine quality of his personality on free and ethical acts of his will rather than in dwelling on the passive inheritance of a divine essence."[36] He achieved a personality in which "the consciousness of the absolute unity of the human and the divine life" came into being. Before Jesus it did not exist. His consciousness of God and his understanding of the kingdom were both socially inherited and transformed in such a way that "The reign of God came to mean the organized fellowship of humanity acting under the impulse of love."[37] Rauschenbusch refers to Jesus as "Liberator" only obliquely, but he definitely does understand that the "personality of Jesus is a call to the emancipation of our own personalities."[38]

Rauschenbusch points out that the social relations in which men and women live affect their conceptions about God and His relations to them. When people lived under various forms of despotism, their conception of God was despotic and autocratic. But the God of Jesus, the Christian

[32] Ibid. 141–43.
[33] Ibid. 144–45.
[34] Ibid. 146.
[35] Ibid. 147.
[36] Ibid. 151.
[37] Ibid. 155.
[38] Ibid. 162–63.

God, is called "Father"—an image taken from the "realm of family life, the chief social embodiment of solidarity and love." The Social Gospel's conception of God is of one "who strives within our striving, who kindles his flame in our intellect, sends the impact of his energy to make our will restless for righteousness, floods our sub-conscious mind with dreams and longings, and always urges the race on toward a higher combination of freedom and solidarity ... ," and one who "is against capitalism, its methods, spirit, and results."[39] This is a God who has been "democratized," is against injustice and innocent suffering, and is the bond of social and racial unity.

The doctrines of the Holy Spirit and of inspiration and prophecy are also democratized in the theology of the Social Gospel. Inspiration and prophecy are understood as gifts not to individuals but to the community, and they spring from the social situation of the Church. "The new thing in the story of Pentecost is not only the number of those who received the tongue of fire but the fact that the Holy Spirit had become the common property of a group. What had seemed to some extent the privilege of aristocratic souls was now democratized.... The mystic experience was socialized."[40]

For Rauschenbusch, baptism is understood as an "act of allegiance to a new order of things ... the symbol of a revolutionary hope, an ethical act which determined the will and life of the person receiving it."[41] The Lord's Supper is an act of a social group in which "we reaffirm our supreme allegiance to our Lord who taught us to know God as our common father and to realize that all men are our brethren ... and thereby accept brotherhood as the ruling principle of our life and undertake to put it into practice in our private and public activities."[42]

The eschatology of the Social Gospel emphasized the immanence of God in history and restoration of the millennial hope, which is an "ideal of a social life in which the law of Christ shall prevail, and in which its prevalence shall result in peace, justice and glorious blossoming of human life.... An outlook toward the future in which the 'spiritual life' is saved and the economic life is left unsaved is both unchristian and stupid."[43] The kingdom of God will come not by "catastrophe" but by evolution. It is always coming but is not finally consummated in history. It is not identified with social progress, but "heaven and earth are to be parts of the same realm" and "Our labor for the kingdom here will be our preparation for our participation hereafter."[44]

Finally, Rauschenbusch reinterprets the doctrine of the atonement in terms of the dominant ideas of his day, "personality and social solidarity."

[39] Ibid. 177 and 184.
[40] Ibid. 189.
[41] Ibid. 198–99.
[42] Ibid. 206.
[43] Ibid. 224.
[44] Ibid. 239.

Jesus was killed by personally experiencing the public sins of organized society. He lists six: religious bigotry, a combination of graft and political power, the corruption of justice, the mob spirit and mob action, militarism, and class pride and class contempt.[45] These public and social sins "sum up the constitutional forces in the kingdom of evil." "Jesus bore these sins in no legal or artificial sense, but in their impact on his own body and soul. They were not only the sins of Caiaphas, Pilate, or Judas, but the social sin of all mankind, to which all who ever lived have contributed, and under which all who ever lived have suffered."[46] This understanding rests on the solidarity of the human race and of Jesus with it.

In summary, then, it can be seen that the theology of the Social Gospel is a reinterpretation of the major doctrines of Christianity in less individualistic and more social terms, strongly integrating social ethics and systematic theology. It is an attempt to overcome the "other-worldliness" of the then current Protestant theology and to provide a theological basis for the social action which the reformers of the Social Gospel movement had been urging on the churches. This theology was quite historically conscious and made good use of historical criticism in its understanding of the New Testament.

The major criticisms of the theology of the Social Gospel have been well summarized by John Bennett. Although Rauschenbusch was very aware of the social structure of sin and the presence of the kingdom of evil, the Social Gospel movement as a whole was too optimistic in its view of history and did not have a sense of the "depth and stubbornness of sin and evil." Further, it was inclined too quickly to identify the kingdom of God with some particular social objective, and it was not always careful to preserve the transcendence of the kingdom as beyond history and as a judgment on history. Finally, the Social Gospel has been criticized for its lack of concern with the issues of racial justice and of women's liberation. In this respect it was a child of its time.[47]

III

By now the striking similarities between the theology of liberation and the Social Gospel should be clear. Both share the rejection of a spiritualized understanding of the gospel, a rejection of excessive individualism, a conviction that salvation is necessarily a social matter and to be achieved in and through human history, and that the kingdom of God, though not identical with any particular political or economic strategy, is continuous with the pursuit of social justice and can only be brought

[45] Ibid. 248–58. [46] Ibid. 258.

[47] John C. Bennett, "The Social Gospel Today," in White and Hopkins, *Social Gospel* 285–88.

about by striving for righteousness in this world.

Further similarities can be seen in the sense of urgency and of prophecy that both theologies display. Rauschenbusch says, for example, that the "social gospel is the voice of prophecy in modern life"[48] and that it is "God's predestined agent to continue what the Reformation began."[49] Both the theology of the Social Gospel and liberation theology feel that time is on their side, that ultimately their views will prevail, that their theologies are the wave of the future. Both movements are obviously anticapitalist: the Social Gospel theology speaks of economic "co-operation" (as in the co-operative movement) and sometimes of "socialism," and the liberation theologians are willing to adopt some form of Marxist socialism and have given rise to the movement known as the Christians for Socialism.

There are, however, some significant differences between the theology of the Social Gospel and liberation theology. First, the social context in contemporary Latin America is not just the injustice caused by rapid industrialization and urbanization. The oppression of which the liberation theologians speak is both political and economic, and stems not only from conflict between unenlightened capital and labor but from the international economic exploitation of the Third World by the First World and from colonial attitudes of long standing on that continent and the attendant "class" consciousness and divisions which were never as strong or established in North America, not even in the period of the Social Gospel movement.

Secondly, the position of Roman Catholicism in Latin America differs considerably from that of the Protestant churches in the United States in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. It is probably correct to say that the Roman Catholic Church has more institutional weight in Latin America than did the Protestant churches in the United States, not only because of numbers or institutional organization but also because the culture is not nearly as pluralistic in contemporary Latin America, and organized religion can have more impact on political and economic conditions.

A third difference, cited by John Bennett, is that the liberation theologians see the need for some form of revolution (not necessarily violent, as Bennett says) rather than a gradual evolution or development through the economic and political system already operative. There is more emphasis on discontinuity in liberation theology than in the theology of the Social Gospel. The Social Gospelers believed that democracy in the political life of North America was working rather well and that it needed only to be extended to the economic sphere. Rauschenbusch says: "We

[48] Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* 279.

[49] Ibid. 177.

have heard only the political overture of democracy, played by fifes; the economic numbers of the program are yet to come, and they will be performed with trumpets and trombones."[50] The theologians of liberation have no such confidence, given the increasingly authoritarian nature of political life in Latin America.

Fourthly, I think that the liberation theologians are less sanguine about "Christianizing the Social Order" (a Rauschenbusch title) and more sophisticated in their understanding and critique of ideologies than were the Social Gospel theologians. Here I must refer not to Gutiérrez but to a more recent work by Juan Luis Segundo in which he discusses the relationship of ideologies to faith, saying that faith must always rise to some ideology but is never to be identified with any particular one.[51] As Bennett points out, there was a greater tendency in the theology of the Social Gospel to identify the Christian ideal with some particular social movement or program: "Sometimes it was democracy. Sometimes it was socialism. Sometimes it was the labor movement. Sometimes . . . it was pacifism."[52]

Lastly, following from the above, liberation theology is more concerned with a theological vision than with social ethics, whereas the Social Gospel was more interested in providing theological underpinnings for ethical action in the social areas. That is not to say that the liberation theologians believe that theology should remain on the level of vision only; they do not. And they certainly are concerned with action, with praxis, not only theory. But by reinterpreting the Christian symbols in the light of the realities of their own situation they are operating on that broad level of symbolic knowledge that can give meaning to and release energy for concrete action.

Having indicated what I think are some striking similarities and some notable differences between Latin American liberation theology as represented by Gutiérrez and the North American experience of the Social Gospel movement, what conclusions would I draw from such a comparison? First, it is helpful to realize that there is a *tradition of "social Christianity"* and that while liberation theology may be new to the Latin American scene, it is not without precedent in other areas. The liberation theologians seem to be unfamiliar with the North American Protestant tradition, and it might help both them and us to situate liberation theology if we keep this experience in mind. Perhaps, as some of the liberation theologians such as Gutiérrez and Segundo spend some time in North American theological centers, they will become more familiar with

[50] Ibid. 178.

[51] Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976) 97–124, and the documents from the third CELAM Conference at Puebla said the same thing.

[52] Bennett, "The Social Gospel Today" 286.

this tradition.

Secondly, does this mean that liberation theology is merely a case of *déja vu*? By no means. But it does suggest that there are themes and aspects of the Gospels that emphasize the social character of Christianity which come into clearer focus at times of social crisis but may fall into the background in other social contexts.

Thirdly, can we predict the viability of liberation theology on the basis of the demise of the Social Gospel movement? Again, I would say not. But it might give us a perspective enabling us to see liberation theology not as a fad (Robert McAfee Brown remarked that any theology that gives voice to the aspirations of two thirds of the world cannot be considered a fad) but rather as a *phase* in the life of Latin American Christianity, as the Social Gospel movement was a phase in the history of North American Christianity—a phase which had some long-lasting consequences.[53] The sense of newness, of urgency, of prophecy which characterizes much of liberation theology should not blind us to the fact that there are precedents and that "social Christianity" is a permanent way of living out the Gospels.

Finally, both liberation theology and the Social Gospel are clearly examples of theologies conditioned by and reflecting the social context from which they emerge. In case we need to be reminded, all theologies are so conditioned.

[53] For example, Martin Luther King Jr. reported that Rauschenbusch had influenced his thinking; cf. Handy, *Social Gospel in America* 259, and White and Hopkins, *Social Gospel* 273–82.