USES OF THE BIBLE IN THE THEOLOGY OF GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ: LIBERATING SCRIPTURES OF THE POOR

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Introduction

Gustavo Gutiérrez is widely recognized as the preeminent foundational figure of the Latin American liberation theology movement. The task of theology, to use Gutiérrez’s classic definition, is “critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of the word of God.” For Gutiérrez, the Bible is the “word of God” that provides a fundamental orientation for all Christian action and reflection, and as such the Bible is indispensable for Christians as a source of revelation about God and humanity.

Given the central place that Gutiérrez assigns to reflection on the Bible, it is somewhat surprising that so little attention has been directed at Gutiérrez’s use(s) of the Bible. Various treatments of

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2 A Theology of Liberation, pp. xxix, 5.

3 For references to “the word of God” as a way of talking about the Bible, see, e.g., A Theology of Liberation, pp. xxxiii, 32; The Power of the Poor in History (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983), pp. 3–4, 102; The Truth Shall Make You Free (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), pp. 47, 88; We Drink from Our Own Wells (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), pp. 34, 95; On Job, p. xvii; and The God of Life (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), pp. 121, 189. I have not found any references to “the word of God” where Gutiérrez seems to be referring to something other than the Bible, although I would not conclude that Gutiérrez consciously restricts the term to the Bible exclusively.
Gutiérrez make reference to the significance of the Bible, and especially to reading the Bible from the perspective of the poor, but I have not found any extended analysis of Gutiérrez’s use(s) of the Bible. This present essay is an attempt to address this lacuna. To that end, I have employed five questions to organize my descriptive analysis: 1) What biblical texts does Gutiérrez use?; 2) How does Gutiérrez use the Bible?; 3) How does Gutiérrez envision the authority of Scripture?; 4) What are Gutiérrez’s hermeneutical principles for using Scripture?; and 5) What is the practical significance of Gutiérrez’s approach to the Bible? After exploring these questions I will conclude with a critical evaluation of Gutiérrez’s use(s) of the Bible.

When we consider how Gutiérrez employs Scripture, it is important to be aware that his approach to the Bible results from and responds to the traditioned understanding he initially received as a student, namely, pre-Vatican II progressive European Roman Catholicism. Gutiérrez received his formal training at two of Europe’s most prestigious and influential Roman Catholic universities, The University of Louvain (1951–55), and the Institut Catholique de Lyon (1955–59). This traditional understanding underwent radical transformation when it came up against Gutiérrez’s experiences as a priest in Lima in the early to late 1960s. When

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