

REVITALIZING THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF GUSTAVO GUTIERREZ'S LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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Abstract

The widespread reality of poverty in Latin America prompted the emergence of liberation theology as a theological response to systemic injustice. Gustavo Gutierrez, one of the central figures in this movement, emphasized the strategic role of religion in dismantling oppressive structures and advocating for the liberation of the poor. This article aims to examine the role of religion in poverty alleviation through the lens of Gutierrez's liberation theology. The study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive-analytical method based on literature review. The findings reveal that Gutierrez distinguishes between two types of poverty: individual and structural. Individual poverty can be addressed through transformation of mindset, work ethic, and education. In contrast, structural poverty—which stems from systemic inequality and domination—requires radical social change grounded in principles of justice. Within this framework, religion is not merely a system of transcendental beliefs, but a liberative praxis capable of challenging injustice and advocating for the marginalized. This article affirms that liberation theology remains relevant not only as a matter of faith, but also as a critical framework for strengthening the role of religion in promoting social justice and siding with the oppressed.

Keywords: *Poverty, Liberation Theology, Role of Religion*

Abstrak

Realitas kemiskinan yang melanda Amerika Latin mendorong lahirnya teologi pembebasan sebagai respons teologis terhadap ketidakadilan struktural. Gustavo Gutierrez, salah satu tokoh sentral dalam gerakan ini, merumuskan bahwa agama memiliki peran strategis dalam membongkar sistem sosial yang menindas dan memperjuangkan pembebasan kaum miskin. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji peran agama dalam pengentasan kemiskinan melalui pendekatan teologi pembebasan ala Gutierrez. Metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif dengan teknik studi pustaka yang bersifat deskriptif-analitis. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa Gutierrez membedakan dua bentuk kemiskinan: individual dan struktural. Kemiskinan individual dapat diatasi melalui transformasi etos kerja dan pendidikan, sementara kemiskinan struktural—yang bersumber dari ketimpangan sistemik—harus dihadapi dengan perubahan sosial radikal yang berlandaskan nilai-nilai keadilan. Dalam konteks ini, agama tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai sistem kepercayaan transendental, tetapi juga sebagai kekuatan praksis yang membebaskan. Artikel ini menegaskan bahwa teologi pembebasan tidak hanya relevan sebagai wacana, tetapi juga sebagai kerangka kritis dalam memperkuat peran agama untuk menegakkan keadilan sosial dan keberpihakan terhadap kelompok yang tertindas.

Kata Kunci: *Kemiskinan, Teologi Pembebasan, Peran Agama*

A. Introduction

Poverty is a persistent social issue that continues to manifest in real human life across different places and times. Although many state and religious institutions have positioned poverty as a critical social problem that must be eradicated, in practice, it remains unresolved to this day (Martin Luther Manao & Abdon A. Amtiran, 2021). In the Indonesian context, although the constitution explicitly states that the poor and neglected are to be cared for by the state, poverty remains a tangible and ongoing social problem. This reality highlights the urgent necessity of involving theological constructions to address the problem of poverty. The unresolved nature of poverty raises numerous questions. Who holds the responsibility for poverty alleviation—the state or religion? What strategies should be adopted to combat poverty? Is poverty a matter of divine fate or the result of systemic power structures? These questions underscore the fact that poverty is a complex and interrelated social issue.

Given its complexity, any effort to address poverty must also involve various complex elements. From a religious perspective, almost all major religions share the belief that poverty must be eradicated—or at the very least, minimized. In Islam, for instance, poverty alleviation is carried out through mechanisms such as zakat. Islam emphasizes that within a Muslim's wealth lies a portion that rightfully belongs to the poor (Suryani Dyah & Fitriani Laitul, 2022). In Christianity, as presented in Luke's theology, poverty is viewed as a social issue that must be addressed. Poverty is not merely an eschatological concern, but also a pressing issue in the present world. The elimination of social problems such as injustice, monopoly, exploitation, poverty, and suffering is not only a matter of future hope but is also a central concern in Christian teachings today (Hananti & Subandrijo, 2021). This is the context from which the idea of liberation emerges, emphasizing that religion must take part in solving poverty as a significant social issue.

Resistance to injustice has also emerged within Islamic liberation theology, as advocated by figures like Asghar Ali Engineer, Hassan Hanafi, Majid Khadduri, and others. Asghar Ali Engineer introduced Islamic Liberation Theology that sides with the poor and oppressed, promoting a revolutionary and active stance against tyranny (Rizal Fanani, 2022). Similarly, Hassan Hanafi introduced the *al-Yasar Islami* movement, which emphasizes solidarity with the marginalized in opposing oppressive authorities (Achmad Faisol Haq, 2020). This indicates that resistance to poverty is a universal message found across religious traditions.

Although many religions view poverty as a social problem, there are also religious beliefs that portray poverty as a divine destiny to be accepted. This divergence in theological views has led to polarization within the Church, which can be categorized into three perspectives: First, the view that wealth is evil and contrary to spiritual values. Second, a dichotomous life perspective that holds that faith is entirely unrelated to material concerns. Third, the belief that poverty is an enemy and wealth is the ultimate goal of life (Martin Luther Manao & Abdon A. Amtiran, 2021).

These contrasting perspectives also produce differing views regarding poverty alleviation. In Christian contexts, this divergence is reflected in the debate over the role of the Church. On one hand, some believe that the Church is a spiritual institution whose primary role is to guide people toward God, while poverty is a social issue and thus the responsibility of the state. On the other hand, there are those who believe that poverty is both a religious and social problem. For this group, religion should not be reduced to a set of ritual practices alone, but must also serve as a vehicle for realizing a just social order.

Liberation theology, rooted in the Christian tradition, emerged to demand the Church's engagement in liberating and saving humanity from injustice, poverty, and various social problems in Latin America. One of the most influential figures in this movement is Gustavo Gutierrez, who mobilized the struggle of oppressed social classes toward genuine liberation (Ngabalin, 2017). For Gutierrez, liberation theology is rooted in biblical foundations that see poverty eradication as a form of God's liberation for His people. Based on this background, this article seeks to answer several questions: How does Gutierrez's liberation theology interpret the reality of poverty? What role does religion play in addressing poverty and injustice? The primary objective of this study is to emphasize the function of religion as a liberative force for fostering a just and humane social life.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach to critically examine the role of religion in poverty alleviation through the lens of liberation theology, particularly as articulated by Gustavo Gutierrez. The research is conducted using a descriptive-analytical method aimed at systematically identifying, organizing, and interpreting relevant textual data without engaging in variable comparison or statistical generalization (Sugiono, 2013). Instead, the focus is on revealing underlying theological frameworks and social meanings embedded in Gutierrez's thought. All data in this study were obtained through library research, involving both primary and secondary sources. The primary data consist of original writings by Gustavo Gutierrez, which form the conceptual foundation of liberation theology. Secondary sources include supporting literature such as academic books, peer-reviewed articles, and previous research that contextualize and expand upon Gutierrez's ideas within broader theological and sociopolitical discourses.

The collected data were thematically categorized around key concepts—such as structural poverty, prophetic religion, and liberative praxis—then analyzed in depth to uncover their interrelations and implications. Special attention was given to identifying how Gutierrez's theology interprets poverty not only as an economic condition but as a form of systemic injustice that demands radical transformation. The analysis process involves both interpretative and critical reflection, aiming to construct a coherent narrative that highlights the function of religion as a transformative force. In doing so, the

study bridges theological reflection with contemporary social challenges, thus reaffirming the relevance of Gutierrez's liberation theology in envisioning a just and humane society.

C. Result and Discussion

1. The Problem of Poverty in the Discourse of Liberation Theology

A theological idea or conceptual framework never emerges in a vacuum; it is always rooted in a specific socio-historical context. Liberation theology itself arose from the lived struggles of Latin American communities plagued by severe poverty (Olson, 1992). It is best understood as a theological movement that emerged in Latin America with a prophetic mission to proclaim justice and the Kingdom of God through Jesus Christ; to interpret Scripture as a message of integral liberation; and to inspire deep-rooted resistance against structured injustice and economic oppression inflicted upon the poor (Gerald O'Collins, SJ & Edward Farrugia, 1996). In this sense, liberation theology functions both as a theological response and a symbol of religious resistance against systemic poverty and exploitation.

The emergence of liberation theology was a response to global inequalities and social crises that revealed the enduring unfreedom of human beings. The pervasiveness of oppression had undermined fundamental humanistic values that affirm human equality before God. Grounded in this perspective, liberation theology prioritizes the value of justice and actively promotes the liberation of all peoples. It seeks to free the oppressed from systems of domination, while simultaneously calling upon the powerful and privileged to stand in solidarity with the weak and marginalized (Candra & Mingkol, 2024). In Latin America, this liberative impulse was championed by numerous religious leaders as a theological and moral response to hegemonic and authoritarian regimes (Paembonan, 2019). Consequently, liberation theology has significantly influenced both ecclesial communities and global theological discourse.

Within the Christian tradition in Latin America, liberation theology has served as a rallying cry to dismantle systems of structural oppression. Across the continent, influential liberation theologians emerged: Gustavo Gutierrez in Peru; Rubem Alves, Leonardo Boff, and Hugo Assmann in Brazil; Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría in El Salvador; Ronaldo Muñoz and Segundo Galilea in Chile; José Miguel Bonino and Juan Carlos Scannone in Argentina, among others (Lowy, 1999). These figures rooted their theological reflections in concrete social realities, offering contextualized interpretations of faith through the lens of liberation.

Among these thinkers, Gustavo Gutierrez stands out as a pioneering voice who significantly shaped the development of liberation theology. Born on June 8, 1928, in Monserrat—a poor neighborhood in Lima, Peru—Gutierrez grew up in a modest Mestizo family of mixed Hispanic and Indigenous descent. Despite facing economic hardship, he was raised in a loving and supportive environment (Ngabalin, 2017). In his youth, Gutierrez suffered from osteomyelitis, a condition that left him with a permanent physical disability. Yet this did not hinder his pursuit of knowledge and academic engagement.

Gutierrez studied philosophy and theology at the Santiago Seminary in Chile, then earned a master's degree in philosophy and psychology at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, in 1951. During his time in Europe, he developed close intellectual ties with key figures such as Camilo Torres—a priest-turned-guerrilla in Latin America—and François Houtart, a prominent advocate of Catholic social theology. Gutierrez later pursued theological studies at the Catholic University of Lyon, France, where he wrote a thesis on religious freedom and drew inspiration from Catholic thinkers like Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, and Yves Congar, who were known for exploring the link between faith and social reality.

In 1959–1960, he continued his theological training at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and was ordained a Catholic priest on January 6, 1959. In 1960, he returned to Peru and began teaching at the Catholic University of Lima. These academic and pastoral experiences shaped his commitment to developing a theology grounded in praxis—one that responds to historical realities and engages with the suffering of the poor. For Gutierrez, theology is not merely a system of transcendent speculation; it is a critical reflection rooted in lived experience and oriented toward concrete social engagement (Tjahjoko, 1991). Christian theology, in his view, must not be confined to doctrinal formulations alone, but must embody practical implications that express faith in action. Gutierrez's liberation theology revitalizes divine awareness as a tool for challenging entrenched social hierarchies and systemic poverty.

Gutierrez observed that poverty in Latin America presented a paradox: how could such a resource-rich region produce such widespread misery? He classified poverty into two main types: individual poverty and structural poverty. Individual poverty, he argued, stems from personal and familial disadvantage—such as being born into a poor household—and is often exacerbated by low motivation, lack of creativity, weak work ethic, or resignation to hardship. This type of poverty, prevalent in Latin American societies, can be addressed through mental transformation, work ethic development, and skill-based education (Mali, 2016). In contrast, structural poverty is rooted in systemic oppression, exploitation, and monopolistic power structures that trap vulnerable groups in cycles of deprivation (Gutierrez, 1985). Also referred to as institutional poverty, this form of inequality often emerges from entrenched sociopolitical systems that claim to promote welfare but in fact perpetuate marginalization (Chen, 2002). Structural poverty is more dangerous and requires radical social transformation for meaningful change.

Gutierrez emphasized that poverty in Latin America is predominantly structural—deliberately maintained by elites through private ownership and unequal access to wealth. The poor are systematically exploited for labor while being denied upward mobility. Based on this reality, Gutierrez called for a radical social revolution that challenges the concentration of economic power and advocates for a more equitable distribution of wealth. Only through such systemic change, he argued, can societies overcome the divide between oppressors and the oppressed (Gutierrez, 1973). Poverty, for Gutierrez, is not only about material deprivation but also about the erosion of human dignity. The fight

against poverty must therefore become the theological core of religious life—a spiritual imperative aimed at restoring justice and equity in human relations. Religion, he contends, must assume an active social role so that faith is not reduced to abstract transcendence. The proclamation of transcendence presupposes the existence of a just and harmonious social order.

It is within this vision that liberation theology takes shape—not as mere critique, but as a call to action. It urges religious communities to resist injustice, challenge oppressive systems, and empower the poor. As Asghar Ali Engineer noted, siding with the oppressed is a defining feature of any theology of liberation (Engineer, 2000). While this theology was born in Latin America, it has inspired faith-based social movements in Asia and other regions, albeit shaped by different historical and cultural dynamics. In Latin America, liberation theology arose largely in opposition to authoritarian regimes and hegemonic power, often driven by clergy and religious activists. The historical legacy of colonialism and structural inequality mirrored similar struggles faced by post-colonial Asian societies. Although shaped by different trajectories, both regions share a commitment to resisting injustice and building a more humane world (Amaladoss, 1997).

2. Revitalizing the Role of Religion in Poverty Alleviation

Poverty is not only a condition of material deprivation but also a form of social exclusion that diminishes human dignity. In the context of Latin America, poverty is understood as a consequence of structural systems that create dependency on those who control capital and resources (Candra & Mingkol, 2024). This structural condition perpetuates injustice and oppression against the poor, rendering inequality a normalized feature of everyday life. Overcoming such embedded poverty requires a radical spirit of liberation that is capable of disrupting the prevailing status quo.

In confronting deeply rooted poverty, liberation theologians have sought to engage the institutional Church as an agent of social transformation. This engagement aligns with the paradigm shift initiated by Pope John XXIII during the Second Vatican Council, where the Church began to identify itself as “the Church of the poor.” This paradigm shift was reaffirmed by Latin American churches through the Medellín Conference (1968) and the Puebla Conference (1979), both of which emphasized that poverty in Latin America stems from social structures that institutionalize injustice and perpetuate oppression (Mali, 2016).

As a consequence, many churches in Latin America have actively embraced the role of religion in social transformation, including efforts to combat poverty. Religious leaders have taken concrete steps to stand alongside oppressed social classes and marginalized individuals (Lowy, 1999). This has also led to pastoral reforms, including the severance of long-standing ties between church authorities and economic elites. The Church redirected its pastoral mission toward confronting systems of slavery and liberating the poor from the chains of deprivation.

The Church thus began to function as an agent of social change, boldly proclaiming a message of liberation grounded in Exodus 3:7–8. This new awareness, long submerged beneath the weight of structured hegemony, reemerged through liberation theology, positioning religion as an oppositional force to injustice and oppression (Mbukut, 2023). This shift marks the theological and moral foundation of a liberative model of religion—one rooted not in abstract doctrines, but in the analysis of concrete realities and the struggle for the rights of the marginalized.

In its essence, religion is meant to serve humanity. All major religions share a common ethical imperative: to restore the dignity of those who have been dehumanized by oppression and inequality (Khadduri, 1999). The revitalization of religion's role in public life, particularly in social domains, is a central demand of liberation theology. Religion must take part in alleviating poverty, especially in contexts where economic resources are monopolized by a wealthy few. Philip Francis Esler similarly argues that the wealthy bear a moral obligation to participate in the liberation of the poor (Esler, 1987). This ethical imperative is also echoed in Luke's theology of salvation, which warns that the rich will face divine judgment if they allow the poor to languish in suffering.

Poverty, wherever it exists, must be regarded as a critical human issue that demands urgent action. Ignoring poverty leads to the erosion of human dignity, as it alienates individuals from one another. This alienation contradicts the social nature of human beings, who are fundamentally relational and oriented toward community (Suseno, 2016). In this context, religion must stand in solidarity with the poor—what liberation theologians call the “preferential option for the poor”—to help them break free from the grip of structural deprivation.

The struggle against poverty lies at the heart of liberation theology. Gustavo Gutierrez elaborates this vision in his book *The Power of the Poor in History*, in which he chronicles the long-standing suffering of the poor and their historical exclusion (Gutierrez, 1985). The poor are rarely acknowledged in historical narratives, as history tends to favor the powerful. Gutierrez asserts that history must also recognize the experiences and struggles of the poor, who continue to resist in order to survive.

In liberation theology, religion is not limited to ritual and transcendental devotion; it also functions as a form of social critique and transformative action. In other words, religion plays a vital role in fostering social change, establishing just communities, and resisting tyranny and injustice (Tataung et al., 2024). Religion must therefore serve as an empowering force in the fight against both individual and structural poverty. As such, any view that reduces religion (or the Church, in the Christian context) to a purely spiritual institution disconnected from social realities must be challenged. Religion is called not only to guide humanity toward the divine but also to take responsibility for addressing the concrete social challenges faced by human communities.

D. Conclusion

The concept of liberation theology emerged from the paradoxical and deeply troubling socio-religious conditions in Latin America. The stark disparity between economic elites and the working poor produced an inhumane and stagnant social structure—one in which some profited at the expense of many. It was in this context that Gustavo Gutierrez introduced liberation theology as a form of resistance against injustice, poverty, and systemic inequality. Theology, according to Gutierrez, must not remain a domain of abstract speculation or transcendental discourse alone, but must serve as a reflective force that responds to the concrete suffering of the poor and the oppressed. Central to his vision is the distinction between individual poverty—which may be addressed through mental, ethical, and educational transformation—and structural poverty, which arises from institutionalized oppression and demands radical social change.

For Gutierrez, confronting poverty and dismantling unjust systems necessitates the active involvement of religion and religious leaders. The role of religion must be revitalized, so that it no longer functions solely as a set of liturgical rituals or doctrines, but becomes a transformative power capable of shaping a more just and humane social reality. Religious leaders must incorporate the theme of poverty into the core of their ministries, thus forging a collective moral and theological commitment to confront injustice. Poverty and inequality not only degrade human life—they violate the very essence of religious faith.

Within this framework, religion—particularly the Church in the Christian context—must walk alongside the poor and the marginalized, resisting all forms of religious and social structures that seek to legitimize or perpetuate poverty. This article affirms that a theological reading of poverty, as developed in Gutierrez's liberation theology, can serve as a powerful liberating force that transcends religious boundaries and remains profoundly relevant in contemporary global and Indonesian contexts.

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