

THE INQUISITION IS ALIVE AND WELL:

FATHER JON SOBRINO PUNISHED FOR HELPING THE POOR

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Most people believe that the Inquisition is now only an embarrassment in the Catholic Church's dark past. Execution and torture, some of the same techniques now revived by the Bush administration, are no longer practiced, but the careers of sincere Catholic leaders are still being ruined, and the psychological effects will linger for the rest of their lives.

Father Jon Sobrino, a leading liberation theologian in El Salvador, has learned that he has committed "errors in his teaching and writings." It is said the church fathers are especially concerned that Sobrino may not believe in Christ's divinity. His punishment is that he can no longer teach, and neither can he publish as a Catholic author.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who is now Pope Benedict XVI, began investigating Sobrino back in 2001. Ratzinger was head of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, which means, in plain English, that he was the Grand Inquisitor in charge of rooting out heretics. Ratzinger has always been a staunch opponent of liberation theology, one that focuses on the economic problems of the poor, rather than correct doctrine, the enforcement of which has always been the Inquisitor's job.

Fernando Saenz Lacalle, the Archbishop of San Salvador, was the one to announce Sobrino's punishment. A member of Opus Dei, the reactionary Catholic group made famous by *The Davinci Code*, was once a head priest for the Salvadoran military, which has been implicated in the murder of 21 nuns and priests, most notably Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated in 1980. When Lacalle became Archbishop in 1995, he was presented with evidence implicating the Salvadoran military, but he did nothing about it.

In the 1980s the Reagan administration fully supported the Salvadoran military's campaign against leftist insurgents. UN Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick claimed that the Catholic sisters who were tortured and killed were not really nuns, and Alexander Haig, Reagan's Secretary of State, branded them as leftist sympathizers who got what they deserved.

In the 1980s I was teaching a course on contemporary theology that included a unit on liberation theology. In addition to studying the works of Sobrino, we also read the Brazilian Leonardo Boff and the Columbian Gustavo Gutierrez.

All three of these thinkers were accused of being Marxists and of supporting violent revolution. But American conservative John Richard Neuhaus defended Gutierrez against this charge, and Boff, once banned from teaching, declared that he was an orthodox Christian, although he "thanked God for Marx's analysis of the mechanism of oppression." Pope John Paul II fought the liberation theologians every step of the way, and as a result the church's mission to the poor and the oppressed has stalled.

Some conservative Christians still claim that the Bible supports free market economics, even though the early church practiced economic communism (Acts 2:44-45). This was not just a temporary emergency policy because 200 years later the Christian theologian Tertullian explained "we hold everything in common except our wives."

Free market reforms in Latin America, following Chile's model, have had limited success, and governments that have tried these policies have been turned out of office. The Chilean Socialist Party that the Nixon administration tried to crush is now back in power, and Michelle Bachelet, whose father was killed by the U.S. backed Pinochet dictatorship, is now the new Socialist Prime Minister.

Liberation theology is not just about economic oppression; it is also about equal rights for women, people of color, gays, and lesbians. It is also about the right to be free from militarism and violent living conditions, and the liberation of all life from pollution and the effects of global warming.

The need for progressive religious leaders and political action on their part is greater than ever. One good example is evangelical minister Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners/Call to Renewal, which just sponsored a rally against the war in Iraq in Washington, D. C. The National Association of Evangelicals has also just passed a policy that supports efforts to reduce global warming.

There are those who will say that neither liberals nor conservatives should mix religion and politics. But in a free society we simply cannot ban religious speech simply because it is part of a political campaign. Furthermore, people do not establish a state religion by simply expressing their religious views.

A liberal democracy allows open discussion and debate, and religious people do not have to check their values and beliefs at the door. All ideas are tested in the arena of public justification, where reasoned argument and judicial review are the norms. Furthermore, anti-abortionists, for example, have every right to use the peaceful tactics of civil disobedience, which worked so well for Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

The reason why Gandhi and King were not criticized for injecting religion into politics is because their message was religiously and culturally inclusive. The Religious Right usually divides and excludes, while Gandhi and King's focus on basic human dignity and universal human rights are embraced by nearly everyone. That should not be surprising because they were or have become the basis for secular laws.

Finally, my research on the origins of religious violence has shown that those religions that focus on practice rather than doctrine are much less violent than those who insist on punishing people because of trivial disputes about doctrine.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Read some of the chapters of his book on religious violence at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/orv.htm. Read or hear his other columns at www.NickGier.com.