

# Liberation Theology and Its Role in Latin America

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In the late 1970s, a poster that was circulated in a Central American country depicted a picture of Christ hanging on a cross with a guerrilla soldier superimposed over His body, arms outstretched. This poster created an uproar throughout the Americas because of its religiously political message. This message of Christ likened to a guerrilla warrior fighting for the liberation of his people was not well received. The poster, however, reflected a new idea that was forming in Latin America--liberation theology.

In 1962, Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) to try to adapt the Christian message to a modern world,<sup>[1]</sup> as well as rethink the nature of the Church, the world and the relationship between the two.<sup>[2]</sup> During the conference, the church redefined its role; the church was now to be seen as the "People of God"--a community of people with different gifts but all sharing common equality, humanity, and destiny in God's eyes.<sup>[3]</sup> Vatican II called for the church to become involved with the struggles of the poor; if the church adopted a humble role, the poor could be reached more effectively.<sup>[4]</sup> The Conference rejected the idea that the church should align itself with the powerful elite<sup>[5]</sup> and affirmed the importance of a more just world.<sup>[6]</sup> Although Latin American bishops did not figure prominently in the Vatican II debates, it was a learning experience for them. When the bishops went home to Latin America, many took a closer look at the oppressive social order in numerous Latin American countries and the role the church played in continuing that order.<sup>[7]</sup>

In the late summer of 1968, the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) met in Medellín, Colombia, with the purpose of applying the concepts of Vatican II to Latin America.<sup>[8]</sup> The outcome was a document that would ultimately be the basis for liberation theology<sup>[9]</sup> and give the church authority to become involved in social change.<sup>[10]</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, a prominent liberation theologian, urged the church to begin speaking of liberation rather than development in addressing the problems faced by Latin America.<sup>[11]</sup> Development of Latin America was not the problem; oppression by the government and First World countries was.

When the conference began, it was a break from tradition because the bishops applied the church to society rather than society to the church. In all documents and discussions, the situation was assessed and then a theological reflection was formed. Finally, a pastoral commitment to solve the problem, such as the creation of Base Ecclesial Communities, was made.<sup>[12]</sup>

During the conference, the bishops called for Catholics to denounce institutionalized violence, enact social change, and carry out "consciousness-raising" evangelism.<sup>[13]</sup> The bishops criticized international imperialism and inequality between the social classes and called for a commitment to the poor. The bishops insisted that violence was wrong, but sometimes necessary when fighting against institutionalized violence, such as violence through the government.<sup>[14]</sup> The Catholic Church made the Medellín document an official document of the Church. Although liberation theology grew out of these officially recognized ideas, the Medellín document is not a liberation theology document. It did, however, lay the groundwork, and since then liberation theology has developed rapidly in the Latin American Catholic church.

## Defining Liberation Theology

First and foremost, liberation theology is a *theology*, not the political movement with which many people equate it. It is, most simply, a coherent set of religious ideas about and promoting liberation from injustice and

oppression of any kind with its basis in the Bible.<sup>[15]</sup> Liberation theology was formed as a reflection of what was seen in Latin American society throughout history, and on the Christian faith's implications for the poor.<sup>[16]</sup> Liberation theologians attempt to read the Bible with the eyes of the poor to help them interpret the Christian faith in a new way.<sup>[17]</sup> Liberation Theology is rooted in a shift in the Catholic church wherein the liberation theologians have chosen to go to the poor and engage them in a reinterpretation of their own religious traditions in a way that is Biblically based.<sup>[18]</sup>

Liberation theologians see God acting throughout Old Testament Biblical history to liberate the Jews from every form of oppression and creating a more just society. When Christ appeared on earth, he brought God's saving work to a new fulfillment by offering liberation from sin (salvation) and all its consequences, such as oppression and injustice.<sup>[19]</sup>

In addition to its Biblical roots, liberation theology offers several analyses of the existing social order in Latin America. It is a strong critique of the various economic and social structures, such as an oppressive government, dependence upon First World countries and the traditional hierarchical Church, that allow some to be extremely rich while others are unable to even have safe drinking water.<sup>[20]</sup> It is also an examination of the Catholic church's activities from the angle of the poor.<sup>[21]</sup> Many liberation theologians feel the church should accept more humble surroundings and become poorer in its own lifestyle.<sup>[22]</sup>

Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian priest and theologian, was the first to write literature specifically identifying the principles of liberation theology. His book, *A Theology of Liberation*, provided the basis for liberation theology by establishing the relationship between human emancipation (in social, political, and economic contexts) and the kingdom of God.<sup>[23]</sup> In *Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez identifies three areas in which humans need liberation: socio-politico-economic liberation from poverty, oppression, and dependence on others for survival, "liberation in history of all dimensions of human freedom, with mankind being responsible for their destinies," and freedom from sin, which is the ultimate root of injustice.<sup>[24]</sup>

Gutiérrez believed the theology had to address itself to the social and political concerns of Latin America by learning from the poor's attempts to liberate themselves from the various oppressive structures.<sup>[25]</sup> *Theology of Liberation* challenged the church to accept the demands of the New Testament and involve itself in the struggles of the poor.

### Liberation Theology and Socialism

Probably the greatest criticism of liberation theology is its association with socialism. There is a uniform conviction among liberation theologians that some form of socialism offers the best hope for Latin America.<sup>[26]</sup> However, liberation theologians acknowledge the failure of Marxist-socialist regimes as well as the failure of capitalism. Capitalism favors the privileged, but socialism, in practice, has involved repression and state-control. However, liberation theologians, such as Gutiérrez, see their theory of socialism as something uniquely Latin American and not simply an imitation of old models of any particular philosophy, including Marxism.<sup>[27]</sup> And the connections between socialism and liberation theology have weakened considerably since its inception to allow liberation theology to appeal to the middle-class. Today, to liberation theologians, socialism offers three advantages: people's basic needs will be met, ordinary people will be active in building a new society, and what is created will be a new Latin America, not a copy of old socialist ideals.<sup>[28]</sup> Base Ecclesial Communities are one of the only practices that combine both liberation theology and socialism, but even the Communities do not endorse Marxist socialism as much as a system of fairness and equality. The connections between liberation theology and socialism are far more apparent in theory than in practice.

## Base Ecclesial Communities

At Medellín, bishops had stated that the church needed to be involved in local communities, but the increasing shortage of priests presented a serious dilemma.<sup>[29]</sup> The ideas behind liberation theology created a solution for this problem. Base Ecclesial Communities (CEBs), although created as a response to the lack of priests before the concrete formation of liberation theology, grew quickly as a way to educate the poor.<sup>[30]</sup> CEBs are neighborhood churches that meet in homes and emphasize participation and equality among their members.<sup>[31]</sup> They are led by trained laity that are committed to improving the community spiritually and establishing a more just society.<sup>[32]</sup> CEB participants have learned to take control of their own futures and cooperate to overcome various local problems.<sup>[33]</sup> As "consciousness-raising evangelism", CEBs are the primary embodiment of liberation theology.<sup>[34]</sup>

The "community" is derived from the idea that groups of similar class meet and exchange ideas, as well as provide a chance to grow together in collective consciousness. The "Ecclesial" refers to the relationship of the community to church and religion. This link to the church provides the community an instrument of reflection--the Bible. The people in the communities are able to use the Bible themselves and not rely on a priest to read the Scriptures during mass, as well as use the Bible as a reflection of their own lives. Finally, "base" is used because not only are the members of CEBs usually of a lower class, but the community is founded on the basis of the Catholic church.<sup>[35]</sup>

## Brazil and the CEB

The Brazilian church has always been one of the most progressive theologically and is the best example of Base Ecclesial Communities. Because of the severe shortage of priests, in 1954, 372 lay catechists were trained to give mass using already consecrated Eucharist.<sup>[36]</sup> By 1960, 475 CEBs were formed on the Northeast coast of Brazil.<sup>[37]</sup> There are no official numbers of CEBs in Brazil today, but the general estimate is that seventy-thousand exist, involving four million people.<sup>[38]</sup>

In Brazil, the church has assumed a decentralized and participatory role which breaks away from the hierarchical nature of the church. The formation of the CEBs provided church participation and influence in a weak civil society, even during the technocratic military rule from 1964-1985.<sup>[39]</sup> In fact, many Catholics see CEBs defining the church in Brazil because the people are now able to relate to the institution.<sup>[40]</sup>

After the 1964 coup, the military government repressed popular movements and opposition forces, including the church. In response to this oppression, the church became more progressive and CEBs became central to the church,<sup>[41]</sup> even existing among the upper-middle class.<sup>[42]</sup> The CEBs introduced new social ideas and democratic methods which led to many participants' active involvement in popular movements of Brazil that worked for progressive social change. An example of progressive social change initiated by the CEBs is in Nova Iguacu. A health program began there to try to organize the population in order to remedy widespread malnutrition, open sewers, and other health hazards. Courses were offered by the area's diocese and four secular doctors that went directly to the poor. The population discussed all the problems they faced, not just health issues; simultaneously the people began organizing CEBs to address these needs. These concrete efforts emphasized the needs of the local population rather than theoretical discussion. It was liberation theology in praxis.<sup>[43]</sup> The neighborhood health courses spread to other CEBs in Nova Iguacu and soon it became a mass movement, though still concerned with the local population's needs. This focus began to change in 1978, when the leadership of the movement became more interested in local and national politics and began working for

progressive change that would come from the national government.<sup>[44]</sup> Many historians see the CEBs of Brazil as having played a significant role in the transition from military rule to democratic politics by becoming involved like the CEBs of Nova Iguacu.<sup>[45]</sup>

Despite their relative success in Brazil, many people have questions about the benefits of CEBs. Critics of CEBs, including the traditional Catholic hierarchy and political scientists, believe that CEBs are too involved in politics, threaten the church's religious identity, and challenge the traditional hierarchical lines of ecclesiastical authority.<sup>[46]</sup> It is true that the religious and social activities of a community tend to mesh<sup>[47]</sup> because the pastoral work that goes into creating a CEB can actually prepare the soil for grass-roots struggle, and possibly a revolutionary struggle.<sup>[48]</sup> CEBs occasionally become more political, like the Nova Iguacu CEBs, but essentially they are pastoral, not political. The social and political impact can be viewed in terms of initial consciousness-raising, the motivation for involvement, the sense of community they develop, the experience of grass-roots democracy, the direct actions they engage in, and finally, directly political actions.<sup>[49]</sup>

### Revolution and Religion in Nicaragua and El Salvador

The role of the church in the 1970s Nicaraguan revolution is undeniable. After Medellín, CEBs were established throughout Nicaragua and encouraged social activism among the youth. In 1970, the new clergy and activist youth began protesting Somoza, the long-time dictator, through hunger strikes and marches. This strong protest sparked the interest of the FSLN (Sandinist Front of National Liberation), and the FSLN and the priests made contact. This grass-roots work laid a basis for church collaboration in the revolution.

Local clergy came into direct conflict with both the regime and the hierarchy of the church by refusing to support Somoza after an earthquake in 1972 brought the corruption of the Somoza regime to light. The established CEBs experienced this corruption and violence firsthand.<sup>[50]</sup> The support for the FSLN grew immensely throughout the CEBs<sup>[51]</sup> and in 1977, several prominent priests announced they were joining the FSLN and other opposition groups.<sup>[52]</sup> The CEBs proved to be effective as a grass-roots political group in the revolution and in July 1979, the FSLN triumphed over Somoza.<sup>[53]</sup>

A slightly different situation occurred in El Salvador. During the early 1970s, the church created CEBs throughout the country. Between the middle to late 1970s, fifteen priests, all of whom worked in rural settings with the poor, were assassinated by Salvadoran death squads in opposition to their CEB efforts.<sup>[54]</sup> As more priests and laity were arrested, beaten, and killed for their progressive work, it was difficult not to associate the situation with "institutional violence" cited at the Medellín conference.<sup>[55]</sup>

In 1977, the same year in which the government party won the elections through massive fraud, Oscar Romero, a conservative priest, was appointed Archbishop of El Salvador. The repression escalated to new levels. On February 28, 100 people were killed during an attack at an open-air Mass and several more priests were subsequently killed. Pamphlets were circulating that read "Be a Patriot, Kill a Priest".<sup>[56]</sup>

Archbishop Romero began giving sermons and writing letters that analyzed the question of violence and non-violence. He cited six types of violence: institutionalized violence, violence of the state against dissidents, violence of the extreme right in defense of the unjust social order, terrorist violence, insurrectional violence against a prolonged tyranny, and lastly, violence of legitimate self-defense.<sup>[57]</sup> Romero gave conditional approval for revolution, but warned of the dangers of unethical means of ending authoritarianism. He is quoted as saying, "Capitalism is in fact what is most unjust and unchristian about the society in which we live".<sup>[58]</sup>

Although the government was overthrown in 1979 and the new junta promised reforms, the oppression continued; Romero spoke out against the new regime and pleaded with the military to stop the repression and

killing. The very next day, while giving Mass, he was murdered in cold blood. During his funeral the following week, two bombs exploded, and shooting broke out killing twenty-six people.<sup>[59]</sup>

In June of 1980, a National Council of the People's Church was established to link a number of CEBs to the dedication of the liberation of the Salvadoran people.<sup>[60]</sup> As a bloody civil war ensued, the church adopted an officially neutral stance, supporting human rights on both sides.<sup>[61]</sup> By March 1982, partial democracy had been restored and some of the right-winged death squads were prosecuted for their crimes.<sup>[62]</sup> Although the church officially held a neutral position throughout the war,<sup>[63]</sup> the oligarchy and military associated popular organizations with the church because many CEBs fed into popular organizations and, subsequently, into guerrilla movements.<sup>[64]</sup>

### Conclusions

Since the late 1950s, the church has made some drastic changes in Latin America and the creation of liberation theology has been an important one. On a continent where the very poor greatly outnumber the wealthy, liberation theology has been met with mixed reviews. The church has come to the defense of the poor and because of this, many people view liberation theology and CEBs as a new life-force in the church that connects people to religion as well as to their society. CEBs, the primary embodiments of the liberation theology, have helped raise the consciousness of the poor, both religiously and socially. Through CEBs, the church has been able to promote reflection on the Bible and give a sense of dignity to the poor. The grass-roots organization that CEBs create have allowed the participants to fight for progressive social change, as in the Nova Iguacu health reforms, and their rights as human beings in some countries, like Nicaragua and El Salvador. However, the majority of CEBs are not political, but exist as simply spiritual communities.

Despite its positive influence, the wealthy elite of Latin America and the official Catholic Church see liberation theology and its progressive ideas as threatening to the status quo. In fact, the Catholic Church's official stance is against liberation theology. The biggest critique of liberation theology is that it tends to reduce faith to politics.<sup>[65]</sup> Gutiérrez responded to this criticism by giving "politics" two distinct meanings-- the effort of the human race to discover their potential, and the search for power. Gutiérrez argues that liberation theology is not for power, but rather for aiding the efforts of humans to discover their capacity.<sup>[66]</sup> Archbishop Romero argued that popular movements and the church are closely related in a positive way, and always have been, but the two are not necessarily fused into one.<sup>[67]</sup> A second criticism from the mainstream Catholic church is the use of Marxism to analyze history and then devise a solution. Many argue that this approach creates a revolutionary praxis and, while claiming to liberate the poor, actually create more violence and oppression.<sup>[68]</sup> Again, the liberation theologians argue that they are not necessarily advocating an economic system based on Marxism, but rather a system that is uniquely Latin American. Capitalism clearly has yet to work in their continent for several reasons, including dependency on First World nations, and exploitation and unstable political regimes. Therefore, it is necessary to create a system that does.

Assessing the true impact of liberation theology in Latin America is extremely difficult because, first and foremost, it is a theology, not a movement; it must be adapted to the situation at hand. Because of this necessary adaptation, there is no example of pure liberation theology praxis; liberation theology in practice differs from country to country--sometimes even from CEB to CEB. The opposition from some governments and church officials that liberation theologians face when attempting to put their theory into practice also makes it more difficult to assess its impact. Very few true studies have been conducted to study liberation theology as a movement, and as a result, the data for case studies is very limited. As in the case of most social science studies, the data that is collected can be used to support liberation theology or to argue against it. Additionally, many of

the scholars that analyze the data from the few case studies are doing so from a capitalistic American's view point. Liberation theology, with its concern for the poor and its connections with Marxism, most often does not sit well with capitalist countries such as the United States. Those who analyze liberation theology praxis from that viewpoint often miss the positive influence that it has had in Latin America.

Liberation theology should be allowed to grow as a theology as the situations in Latin America change. Liberation theology has changed since its inception; it has become less radical and more pragmatic. It has accepted that organization, not revolution, is the best way to combat repression. But, using the Bible as its basis, it still sees the world as characterized by conflict more than by compromise, by inequality more than by equality, and by oppression more than by liberation.<sup>[69]</sup> Perhaps the critics of liberation theology need to remember the historical context from which the theologians are speaking. Latin America is far from the democracy that the United States experiences. The Catholic Church, as well, must realize that a majority of the Catholics in the world reside in Latin America, most of which are poor. Liberation theology is able to connect the church to the people as well as provide hope for the future.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Arthur F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 5

<sup>[2]</sup> Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 94

<sup>[3]</sup> Ibid. 96

<sup>[4]</sup> Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 7

<sup>[5]</sup> Smith, 97

<sup>[6]</sup> McGovern, 5

<sup>[7]</sup> Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, 17

<sup>[8]</sup> Smith, 18

<sup>[9]</sup> Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, 22

<sup>[10]</sup> Smith, 18

<sup>[11]</sup> McGovern, 8

<sup>[12]</sup> Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, 23

<sup>[13]</sup> Ibid., 23

<sup>[14]</sup> McGovern, 9

<sup>[15]</sup> Smith, 27

<sup>[16]</sup> Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, 4

<sup>[17]</sup> Ibid., 4, 5

<sup>[18]</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>[19]</sup> McGovern, 10

<sup>[20]</sup> Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, 5

<sup>[21]</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>[22]</sup> McGovern, 11

<sup>[23]</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *Essential Writings*, ed. James B. Nickoff (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 26

<sup>[24]</sup> McGovern, 10

<sup>[25]</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>[26]</sup> Ibid., 146

<sup>[27]</sup> Ibid., 147

<sup>[28]</sup> Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, 92

<sup>[29]</sup> Ibid., 67

<sup>[30]</sup> Smith, 107

<sup>[31]</sup> Smith, 106

<sup>[32]</sup> Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, 64

<sup>[33]</sup> Scott Mainwaring, "Brazil: The Catholic Church and the Popular Movement in Nova Iguacu, 1974-1985" *The Politics of Liberation Theology*, ed. Daniel H. Levine (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 141

- [34] Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, 63
- [35] Thomas C. Bruneau, "Brazil: The Catholic Church and Basic Christian Communities" *Religion and Political Conflict in Latin America* ed. Daniel H. Levine (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 110-111
- [36] Bruneau, 108
- [37] *Ibid.*, 106
- [38] *Ibid.*, 107
- [39] *Ibid.*, 107, 108
- [40] *Ibid.*, 108, 109
- [41] Mainwaring, 126
- [42] *Ibid.*, 140
- [43] *Ibid.*, 147, 130-132
- [44] *Ibid.*, 132
- [45] John R. Pottenger, *The Political Theory of Liberation Theology* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 141
- [46] Mainwaring, 126
- [47] Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, 68
- [48] *Ibid.*, 72
- [49] *Ibid.*, 72-73
- [50] Michael Dodson, "Nicaragua: The Struggle for the Church" *Religion and Political Conflict in Latin America*, ed. Daniel H. Levine (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 83
- [51] *Ibid.*, 84
- [52] *Ibid.*, 85-86
- [53] *Ibid.*, 86
- [54] Paul E. Sigmund, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 109
- [55] *Ibid.*, 111
- [56] *Ibid.*, 112
- [57] *Ibid.*, 113
- [58] *Ibid.*, 113
- [59] *Ibid.*, 114
- [60] *Ibid.*, 114
- [61] *Ibid.*, 115
- [62] *Ibid.*, 116
- [63] *Ibid.*, 117
- [64] Phillip Berryman, "El Salvador: From Evangelization to Insurrection," *Religion and Political Conflict in Latin America*, ed. Daniel H. Levine (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 70, 75
- [65] McGovern, 16
- [66] *Ibid.*, 100
- [67] Berryman, "El Salvador," 76
- [68] *Ibid.*, 132
- [69] Sigmund, 181