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"For Yours is the Kingdom of God": A historical analysis of liberation theology in the last two decades and its significance within the Christian tradition

Virginia Irby
College of William and Mary

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“For Yours is the Kingdom of God:”

A historical analysis of liberation theology in the last two decades
and its significance within the Christian tradition

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Religious Studies from
The College of William and Mary

by

Virginia Kathryn Irby

Accepted for _____
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

John S. Morreall, Director

Julie G. Galambush

Tracy T. Arwari

Williamsburg, VA
April 29, 2009

This thesis is dedicated to all those who have given and continue to give their lives to the promotion and creation of justice and peace for all people.

“He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?” declares the LORD.”

-Jeremiah 2

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Introduction

Liberation theology is well-known in Christian circles as a prominent movement in Latin American Catholicism from the 1960s to the 1980s that has since faded from the theological scene. In our present 2009 context, with the world dominated by free market economies and churches advocating personal piety for the sake of individual salvation, it is enticingly easy to declare that liberation theology is dead. Certainly the last two popes, John Paul II (1978-2005) and the Benedict XVI (2005-present), have proclaimed many times that liberation theology's day is over. Many scholars, too, have come to consider liberation theology a part of history rather than an active movement within present-day Christianity. Some, Carol Ann Drogus among them, have even argued that liberation theology was never anything more than a radical sect within Christianity. Drogus claims that liberation theology was disproportionately represented at the 1968 Latin American Episcopal¹ Conference (*Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano*, abbreviated CELAM) held in Medellín and over-publicized by the media but in the long run has had little effect on the whole of Christianity.²

However, as I intend to explain, such an idea oversimplifies liberation theology and ignores the significant impact it has had within Christianity and within Latin America by viewing it as an individual failed movement instead of part of a long tradition of radical and often subversive social justice that continues to emerge within Christianity. In contrast, I argue that although it has significantly declined in the last two decades,

¹ In this context and in the rest of this paper, "Episcopal" refers to Catholic bishops, not the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States.

² Carol Ann Drogus, "Review: The Rise and Decline of Liberation Theology: Churches, Faith, and Political Change in Latin America," *Comparative Politics* (Vol. 27.4 1995: 465-477) 465-468.

liberation theology remains an active movement that has left a lasting mark on Latin America and is ultimately only one part of a social justice initiative within Christianity that will inevitably continue in the future.

I will develop this argument in the following chapters. First, I will give a basic overview of liberation theology's ideology, history, and relationship to the Vatican during liberation theology's "golden age," which lasted from the 1960s to the mid-1980s. Second, I will explain the decline of liberation theology in the 1990s and 2000s, focusing particularly on repression from the Vatican, changes in the political climate of Latin America, and the rise of Evangelical Protestantism. Third, I will discuss the present-day state of liberation theology and its impact on Latin America, looking at social, political, and religious developments that in one way or another are related to liberation theology. Fourth and lastly, I will analyze liberation theology's roots within Christianity and its significance as a part of the Christian initiative for social justice.

Chapter I: Liberation Theology at its Height

Basic Ideology

Liberation theology is a religious and political movement that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s within Latin American Catholicism. It blends Biblical material and Catholic social teaching with extra-Biblical sources, especially Marxist social and economic theory, to create a theology centered around “a preferential option for the poor” and their liberation from hunger, poverty, and oppression. Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Catholic priest and scholar from Peru and perhaps the best known “founding father” of liberation theology, firmly asserts that although liberation theology is very active in the social and political sectors of life, it is at its core a spiritual movement that inspires social action for the creation of God’s just Kingdom on earth.³

Liberation theology stands out as a significant movement in the history of the Catholic Church.⁴ Until the 1960s, the Latin American Church had traditionally served as a defender of the political status quo, first colonialism, and after independence movements, development and capitalism. The bishops and priests who began liberation theology boldly asserted that in defending the imperialist status quo, the Church had been on the wrong side of justice.⁵ Renouncing the Church’s triumphalism in claiming to be perfected as a just and Christ-like institution, the founders of liberation theology called

³ Daniel H. Levine, “Assessing the Impacts of Liberation Theology in Latin America,” *The Review of Politics* (Vol. 50.2 1988: 241-263) 247-248.

⁴ Henceforth, I will use the word “Church” to refer to the Catholic Church. When referring to the whole Church (Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox), I will identify it as the “ecumenical Church.”

⁵ Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, (Trans. Paul Burns. New York: Maryknoll, 1986) 86-87.

Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People: The Struggle for Human Rights in Latin America – The Catholic Church in Conflict with U.S. Policy*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 17-19.

for reform, both in the Church to truly live by the teachings of Jesus and in society to provide all with the necessities for survival.

In Daniel Levine's article "The Impact of Liberation Theology," (1988) he cites four of the movement's main ideological themes.⁶ The first is a new concern within the Church for history and historical change. As a living institution, liberation theologians believe that the Church should be an educated and relevant establishment that, instead of defending an unjust and out-of-date status quo, seeks to interpret and respond to the "signs of the times." In his book *A Theology of Liberation* (1971), Gutiérrez interprets Latin America's situation using the dependency theory. This theory asserts that poverty, underdevelopment, and military authoritarianism in the Third World are the direct and unavoidable results of development and extravagant capitalism in Western, or more accurately described, Northern countries.⁷ Applying the dependency theory, Gutiérrez explains that under neoliberal economic theory, these prosperous Northern countries urge Third-World countries to accept loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund so that they too may "develop" and experience prosperity. In reality, this leaves underdeveloped countries in enormous debt and increases the gap between their rich and poor. Gutiérrez advocated that both Latin America and Northern countries switch from this theology and ideology of development to one of liberation for the suffering poor of the exploited and underdeveloped countries.⁸

A second theme Levine mentions is a radical return to Biblical sources. While the transcendental elements of the Bible remain important to liberation theologians, they

⁶ Levine, 241-246.

⁷ Michael Löwy and Claudia Pompan, "Marxism and Christianity in Latin America," *Latin American Perspectives* (Vol. 20.4 1993: 28-42), 35-37.

⁸ Edward J. Martin, "Liberation Theology, Sustainable Development, and Postmodern Public Administration," *Latin American Perspectives* (Vol. 30.4 2003: 69-91), 71.

emphasize that in Biblical texts that are usually spiritualized, there is a story of an immanent and active God involved in this world and determined to implement his just Kingdom.⁹ Liberation theology favors Biblical books about earthly justice, such as Exodus, the Hebrew Prophets, the Gospels, and Revelation,¹⁰ and believes in a God who is not an impartial observer in history but instead actively takes the side of the oppressed.¹¹ Standard Christian doctrine is interpreted in new ways, focusing on how it can be related to the situation of the poor. Gutiérrez reinterprets sin not as personal immorality but as “fundamental alienation” and the “root of injustice and oppression.”¹² Jesus’ death is seen as an ultimately political matter because of his unfailing orthopraxis and dedication to the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. Leonardo Boff calls Jesus a “guerilla crucified for his liberatory practice.”¹³ Christ’s resurrection symbolizes the power of hope and metaphysical inspiration to inspire people to true political liberation on earth.¹⁴

A third central theme of liberation theology is a theological and practical stress on the poor. Leonardo and Clodovus Boff, in their *Introduction to Liberation Theology*, speak of this as “hermeneutical mediation,” or reading the Bible for its practical meaning, particularly what it says to the poor.¹⁵ The catchphrase of a “preferential option for the poor,” coined at the 1979 CELAM conference in Puebla, Mexico, asserts that the Church

⁹ Michael E. Lee, “Liberation Theology’s Transcendent Moment: The Work of Xavier Zubiri and Ignacio Ellacuría as Noncontrastive Discourse,” *The Journal of Religion* (Vol. 83.2 2003: 226-243), 228. Harvey Cox, *The Silencing of Leonardo Boff: The Vatican and the Future of World Christianity* (Oak Park, IL: Meyer-Stone Books, 1988), 63.

¹⁰ Boffs, *Introduction*, 32-35.

¹¹ Boffs, *Introduction*, 50-52

¹² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson; New York: Maryknoll, 1973 orig. 1971), 175-176.

¹³ Carl G. Herndl and Danny A. Bauer, “Speaking Matters: Liberation Theology, Rhetorical Performance, and Social Action,” *College Composition and Communication* (Vol. 54.4 2003: 558-585), 573-580.

¹⁴ Boffs, *Introduction*, 52-55.

¹⁵ Boffs, *Introduction*, 32-35.

should work first and foremost to promote justice for those in financial need. Rejecting the typical idea of charity, liberation theology views the poor not as objects of sympathy for which the Church must act, but as ordinary human beings with whom the Church must work for liberation.¹⁶

The last major characteristic of liberation theology is its use of Marxism to interpret the political situation in Latin America. As will be discussed below, this is where most critics of liberation theology within the Church find fault. Using a Marxist lens, liberation theology examines vast poverty and sees it not as a personal moral vice to be combated by outside aid or a backwardness to be set straight through reform, but as a dialectical oppression that can only be overcome through revolution.¹⁷ Liberation theology shares the Marxist idea that only the poor can bring an end to poverty; they, as the proletariat, must bring about their own revolution. As mentioned above, this is a significant departure from the aid and charity mentality that the Church has so often applied when dealing with the issue of poverty.¹⁸

Along with this education in the basic tenets of liberation theology, the priests, bishops, and laypeople involved in the movement strongly advocated participation in Ecclesiastical Base Communities (*Comunidades Eclesiales de Base*, abbreviated CEBs), groups of ten to thirty members who spent time in fellowship sharing their lives and often their possessions.¹⁹ These CEBs had three main purposes: Bible study, fellowship and consciousness-raising, and communal, political, and social action for justice and

¹⁶ Levine, 241-246.

¹⁷ Boffs, *Introduction*, 24-26.

¹⁸ Löwy and Pompan, 35-37.

¹⁹ Lernoux, 37-41.

liberation.²⁰ Liberation theologians believed that the Church should be a place of communion, fellowship, and equality for all, and that this is best enacted through smaller and more personal groups like CEBs (which will be discussed in more detail below).²¹ Ultimately, it was this grassroots attitude of unity from below that brought liberation theology its greatest triumphs and left the most lasting impact on Christianity and on Latin America.²²

A Brief History of the Church in Latin America and Liberation Theology through the Early 1980s

As I mention above, before the dawn of liberation theology, the Church in Latin America had a history of defending the status quo and supporting the oppressor. During Spanish and Portuguese colonization in the 1500s, the Catholic Church was the political institution in charge of Christianization and education of the indigenous people, which turned into an enculturation into European culture, economic strategies, and religion. As Christian Smith writes in his book *The Emergence of Liberation Theology* (1991), “The conquest introduced a social order in which the crusade of Spain and the mission of Jesus Christ were identical.”²³ In 1508, Pope Julius II established a *patronato real* (an agreement between the Catholic Church and Spanish crown) with the Spanish monarch, strongly strengthening the already close relationship between Church and state and

²⁰ H. Mark Roelofs, “Liberation Theology: The Recovery of Biblical Radicalism,” *The American Political Science Review* (Vol. 82.2 1988: 549-566), 558-560.

²¹ Boffs, *Introduction*, 59-60.

²² Levine, 246-247.

²³ Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 12.

allowing the Church as an institution to become an incredibly wealthy landowner.²⁴

However, even in these early years, there were bishops and priests within the Church who opposed the merciless domination, subjugation, and murder of the indigenous people and the oppressive government of the conquest. Liberation theologians of the twentieth century regard these people, such as Bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas of Chiapas, Mexico, and Bishop Diego de Medellín of Santiago, Chile, as their predecessors, saints, and heroes.²⁵

The Church remained a defender of European authority until Latin America gained independence in the first half of the nineteenth century. Even then, once it was clear to Catholic authorities that these countries would remain independent entities, the Church sided with the wealthy, European-born elite class that took control after independence was won.

The Church's next big move came in the years after World War II, when accelerated capitalism and secularism from the Northern countries began to have their effects on Latin America.²⁶ Seeing its relevance and authority decreasing, the Catholic Church made a shift into what it called "New Christendom:" a movement to create a progressive-friendly, reformist Church committed to being a source of aid. This movement was intermittently successful until the end of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, when the Church's worldview was reshaped in such a way as to pave the road for liberation theology.²⁷ This "New Christendom" movement brought about the aid program Catholic Action, a reformist mission group where many advocates of liberation

²⁴ Harry E. Vanden and Gary Prevost, *Politics of Latin America: The Power Game (Second Edition)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 36.

²⁵ Smith, *Emergence*, 12-13.

²⁶ Löwy and Pompan, 30-33.

²⁷ Smith, *Emergence*, 14-15.

theology got their start.²⁸ It also witnessed the formation of the politically bland Christian Democratic Parties, which offered platforms of moderate reform. Meanwhile, in the 1950s in Brazil, the Christian Academic Youth (*Juventude de Universitária Cristã*, abbreviated JUC) was formed and became the very first synthesis of Christianity and Marxism in Latin America. They engaged in political and religious dialogues and encouraged grassroots social movements such as the Grassroots Educational Movement (*Movimento Educação de Base*, abbreviated MEB) and Popular Action (*Ação Popular*, abbreviated AP).²⁹ Elsewhere in Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s, a renewal within the Church was beginning, calling for social justice and creating reform groups like the Young Christian Students, Young Christian Workers, and Young Christian Agriculturalists. Though they worked for and advocated justice for the poor, these groups were usually made up of middle class Christians, not the poor and oppressed themselves.³⁰ In response to these movements of social reform, authoritarian military dictatorships began to replace the populist governments of earlier years in the name of protecting national security. Ironically, these dictatorships were often the final spark that led to socialist revolutions in many countries and the emergence of liberation theology within the Church.³¹

Along with these changes in Latin America, the Catholic Church as a whole was experiencing a time of re-visioning, culminating in Pope John XXIII's (1958-1963)³² convocation of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). After John XXIII's death,

²⁸ Jeffrey L. Klaiber, "Prophets and Populists: Liberation Theology 1968-1988," *The Americas* (Vol. 46.1 1989: 1-15), 5-6.

²⁹ Löwy and Pompan, 33-35.

³⁰ Boffs, *Introduction*, 67

³¹ Boffs, *Introduction*, 66-67.

Jean Daudelin and W. E. Hewitt, "Churches and Politics in Latin America: Catholicism at the Crossroads," *Third World Quarterly* (Vol. 16.2 1995: 221-236), 224.

³² Years in parenthesis signify term of papacy, not lifespan.

Vatican II was carried on and finished by Pope Paul VI (1963-1978).³³ Vatican II opened up Catholic theology so that budding liberation theologians had more flexibility for creative thinking and altered the Church's self-image and idea of its relation to history; the Church began to view itself as a "fellow pilgrim" with humankind, not an elevated institution above humanity and removed from history.³⁴

In response to Vatican II and the changing social and political situation in Latin America, shifts already happening in the Church were amplified and distinct personalities with different approaches to liberation theology began to appear. One example was Dom Hélder Câmara, a bishop from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, who was an active leader and participant in reform movements such as Catholic Action and the Basic Education Movement and one of the initiators, along with Chilean Bishop Manuel Larraín, of CELAM, the previously discussed Latin American Episcopal Conference that began in 1955. After Vatican II, Câmara publically renounced capitalism and the poverty and violence it had created in Latin America and called for a move toward Christian socialism that would begin with consciousness-raising among the poor. Câmara put his words into action by boldly sharing his beliefs and working with the poor in CEBs and churches. In contrast, another figure that emerged in liberation theology was Camilo Torres, a Colombian priest and sociologist often known as the "guerilla priest." In May 1965, he organized the *Frente Unido*, a political front composed of both rich and poor committed to working for change. However, after being chastised by his Cardinal for his involvement in political action, he renounced his priesthood and joined a guerilla army, in which he was killed in 1966. Though Gutiérrez and other front-runners in circles of

³³ Löwy and Pompan, 30-33.

³⁴ Boffs, *Introduction*, 69.
Smith, *Emergence*, 17.

liberation theology criticized Torres' resort to violence, many young Latin Americans committed to social justice were inspired by his radicalism and made him a martyr for their cause.³⁵ Role models like Câmara and Torres as well as theological colloquia held within and outside of Latin America paved the way for the decisive CELAM conference at Medellín in 1968.³⁶

From August 24 to September 6, 1968, 130 Latin American bishops met in Medellín, Colombia for the second official CELAM conference. Their goal was to apply the new ideas of Vatican II to the situation in Latin America and come up with a more relevant theology. They ended up producing the documents that would quickly become the “Magna Carta” of liberation theology. In these controversial documents that were ratified as the official position of the Latin American Church until the next conference in 1979, Latin American bishops acknowledged, “a deafening cry...from the throats of millions of men, asking their pastors for a liberation that reaches them from nowhere else” and asserted that, in response to this cry, “the Latin American bishops cannot remain indifferent.”³⁷ They called the Church to action for radical social change and authentic liberation of the poor through consciousness-raising, support of CEBs, and ecumenical and secular collaboration for the sake of social justice. They condemned both unbridled capitalism and raw Marxism, calling instead for a restructuring of society through solidarity with the poor.³⁸ This conference brought about a wide variety of outcomes: clergy and religious leaders began advocating for the poor and participating in political protests, CEBs increased to about 200,000 in number across Latin America by

³⁵ Smith, *Emergence*, 15-17.
Lernoux, 31-36.

³⁶ Boffs, *Introduction*, 69.

³⁷ Smith, *Emergence*, 18-19.

³⁸ Smith, *Emergence*, 18-19.

1978, and bishops, priests, and cardinals with differing views on the subject began the arguments that would ultimately play an important part in liberation theology's decline. In 1969, two years before his groundbreaking book *A Theology of Liberation* (1971) was published, Gutiérrez presented his ideas about a theology of liberation at a meeting of the World Council of Churches in Cantigny, Switzerland, bringing international acclaim to Latin America's new and distinctive theology.³⁹

Liberation theology reached its peak in the 1970s as it transitioned from a movement of educated theologians and church leaders to a movement of the people of the Latin American Church.⁴⁰ On the leadership side, Gutiérrez's book *A Theology of Liberation* was published in 1971, followed closely by Leonardo Boff's book *Jesus Christ, Liberator* in 1972. In 1970 and 1971, Christian congresses in Bogotá, Colombia, and Buenos Aires, Argentina met to address how to integrate liberation theology into the everyday life of the Church. In August 1975, the first congress of Latin American theologians met in Mexico City.⁴¹ On a popular level, CEB participation continued to increase, with an estimated three to four million people active in the groups by 1980.⁴² CEBs benefited particularly from the involvement of laypeople in leadership roles, a practice that had originated because of a shortage of priests but became an opportunity for empowerment of poor, ordinary people.⁴³ Christians participated in socialist revolutions, concepts of liberation theology were taught in seminaries, and the ecumenical Church⁴⁴ in Europe, North America, Africa, and Asia began to take an

³⁹ Smith, *Emergence*, 20-21.

⁴⁰ Boffs, *Introduction*, 70-73.

⁴¹ Boffs, *Introduction*, 69-74.

⁴² Daudelin and Hewitt, 224.

⁴³ Klaibur, 7.

⁴⁴ By "ecumenical Church" I mean the whole Christian Church: Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox.

interest in the subject. The Sandinista triumph of 1979 in Nicaragua owed much of its success to Christian forces, and three priests, Ernesto Cardenal, Fernando Cardenal, and Miguel de Escoto, were even awarded cabinet positions.⁴⁵

However, like all new movements, liberation theology met resistance and opposition as well during its decade of greatest power. In 1972, more conservative bishops were elected to CELAM, led by Alfonso López Trujillo, the man who would become liberation theology's greatest opponent within Latin America. As the head of CELAM, he used his power to dismiss bishops who favored liberation theology and replace them with conservative bishops that would conform to his line of thinking. As liberation theology and socialist movements strengthened and gained influence, authoritarian military regimes held tighter to their power, persecuting priests and creating even more difficult living conditions for the poor.⁴⁶ Liberation theology was also strongly opposed by the government of the United States, which regarded it a communist threat. In 1969, President Nixon of the U.S. sent Nelson Rockefeller to Latin America to determine what effect these socialist liberation movements would have on the United States; Nixon eventually sided with the oppressors.⁴⁷ In 1982, President Reagan issued the Santa Fe Document, declaring that liberation theology was dangerous because of its potential to inspire revolution and that it should be countered with U.S. attacks (see below).⁴⁸ Liberation theology also met with criticism from the Vatican on its ideological sources and practices (see below), though most of this criticism came to light in the 1980s.

⁴⁵ Smith, *Emergence*, 22-23.

⁴⁶ Smith, *Emergence*, 21-22.

⁴⁷ Lernoux, 58-59.

⁴⁸ Löwy and Pompan, 28-30.

In January 1979, CELAM met for its third conference in Puebla, Mexico, to reexamine older documents and ideas about liberation theology. Trujillo, who remained the leader of CELAM, did all he could to make sure that liberation theology would be extinguished. He appointed fellow conservatives to preside over committees, intentionally neglected to invite any self-identified “liberation theologians” to the conference, and invited Pope John Paul II, known for his opposition to communism and resulting apprehension concerning liberation theology. However, the end result of what happened at Puebla was ambiguous.⁴⁹ On the one hand, Trujillo’s original conservative document was rejected until many changes had been made, many of which were in support of liberation theology. In fact, as mentioned earlier, Puebla is where the phrase “preferential option for the poor” originated.⁵⁰ On the other hand, the language of liberation theology was watered down and domesticated to the point where it lost much of its original rhetorical power and radical initiatives. At its finish, both sides of the debate claimed Puebla as a victory for their cause, leaving subsequent years to determine the future of liberation theology.

A Political History of Latin America from Colonization to the 1980s

We will return to an examination of liberation theology in the 1980s, particularly its interaction with the Vatican, after a brief summary of the political evolution of Latin America that made it the perfect breeding ground for liberation theology in the twentieth century. Spanish and Portuguese colonization of Latin America began at the very end of the fifteenth century and continued throughout the sixteenth century with Hernán Cortés

⁴⁹ Smith, *Emergence*, 23-24.

⁵⁰ Levine, 241-246.

and Francisco Pizarro conquering the Aztec and Incan Empires, respectively.⁵¹ Their methods of colonization involved subjugating and decimating most of the indigenous population but retaining a sizable labor force. However, when European diseases severely diminished the remaining indigenous population, African slaves were brought in to supplement the workforce. This pattern set the stage for liberation theology by creating as early as the 1500s a pyramidal society with white Europeans higher than indigenous peoples and Africans.⁵² The Iberians also brought with them a new understanding of land. Indigenous Latin Americans believed the land was a sacred entity that could not be owned, but the Iberians ascribed to European feudalism. Landlords were given grants by the King that developed into large landed estates known as *latifundos*, controlled by a patron and worked by peons. This feudal system and attitude toward land continued in various forms well into the twentieth century, laying the groundwork for liberation theology.⁵³

Latin American countries won their independence from Europe in the first part of the nineteenth century, beginning with a slave revolt in Haiti in 1804 and culminating in the defeat of the Spanish army in Ayacucho, Peru in 1824, which is considered the official end of Iberian rule in America.⁵⁴ However, the structure of society remained the same, with a European elite class and masses of poor indigenous Americans and Africans.⁵⁵ Though the social system stayed intact, Latin American economies found themselves struggling for lack of political unity whereby to rebuild the country, maintain an army, and enforce tax collection. These countries resorted to taking out loans from

⁵¹ Vanden and Prevost, 39-40.

⁵² Lernoux, 15-17.

⁵³ Vanden and Prevost, 9-10.

⁵⁴ Vanden and Prevost, 48, 74.

⁵⁵ Lernoux, 15-17.

foreign, developed nations, particularly Great Britain, in order to develop and integrate themselves into the world economy; however, these loans left them in a state of debt to and monetary dependence on the developed nations that remains today. Embracing free trade, Latin America began exporting raw goods to the developed world in exchange for manufactured goods from Europe. Although this system benefited the elites, those who were already poor fell deeper into poverty as their land was taken over for free trade farming and their needs were neglected for the sake of satisfying the world market. Reformist parties began to form, like the Radical Civil Union in Argentina, but had little success. As the twentieth century began, Europe and North America began to encourage and implement development, especially in the areas of railroads and mining, in Latin America's primarily agricultural economy. Reforms were made in the name of development, science, and democracy, but in reality, very little if anything changed in the living conditions of the common people.⁵⁶

In the 1910s, two revolutions occurred that forever changed the course of Latin American history. In 1910, the Mexican Revolution began with a lower class revolt against the Díaz dynasty with the rallying cry of "*pan y tierra*" (bread and land) for the poor. Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata led the lower class to victory in 1917, when a radical new constitution was instated promoting land reform, protection of workers, rejection of the power of the Church, and a break away from European culture in favor of indigenous cultures. 1917 was also the year of the Russian Revolution, which presented progressive socialism – and later communism – as a viable alternative to long-reigning capitalism.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Vanden and Prevost, 42-43, 49-53.

⁵⁷ Vanden and Prevost, 55-56.

Despite being able to look to these revolutions for inspiration and motivation, the poor of Latin America continued to experience worsening social conditions in the twentieth century. The United States significantly increased its involvement in the area, building the Panama Canal in 1909 and frequently sending the Marines into Central America to uphold the status quo and counter budding revolutionary movements.⁵⁸ Meanwhile industrialization, globalization, and commercialization of agriculture led to a loss of farmland for Latin American peasants and a significant decline in the local markets of Latin American countries, making it difficult and sometimes nearly impossible for common people to grow or purchase the food they needed to survive. For example, in 1970, 0.1% of the total farmers in Guatemala owned 40.8% of the land, and 1.1% of farmers in Peru owned 82.4%.⁵⁹ Reform movements and revolutions sprang up in nearly every Latin American country, including revolutions in Guatemala, Brazil, Colombia, and Argentina, and reform movements in Chile and Peru,⁶⁰ but none were ultimately successful until the Cuban Revolution of 1959, in which Fidel Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara overthrew Sergeant Fulgencio Batista in a Marxist revolution using guerilla tactics.⁶¹ The Cuban Revolution was a huge source of inspiration to the rest of Latin America because it was the first significant grassroots victory against imperial powers and also demonstrated the possibility of a communism independent of Soviet Stalinism, which in the next three decades would decline and eventually fail.⁶²

The Cuban Revolution was followed by other socialist victories in the 1970s, though none as decisive or long-lasting. In 1970 in Chile, Socialist Salvador Allende

⁵⁸ Vanden and Prevost, 53-54.

⁵⁹ Vanden and Prevost, 10-11.

⁶⁰ Vanden and Prevost, 59-65.

⁶¹ Vanden and Prevost, 61-62.

⁶² Löwy and Pompan, 30-33.

defeated Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei in a democratic election and instated a Popular Unity government that was successful in executing reforms until 1973, when Allende was overthrown and killed by a right-wing, U.S.-backed military coup. Augusto Pinochet became the military dictator until 1990 and led an incredibly oppressive regime with the main purposes of extinguishing socialism and returning to a free market economy.⁶³ In 1979 in Nicaragua, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*, abbreviated FSLN) overthrew the Somoza dynasty in another triumph of non-Soviet communism. The Sandinistas maintained power, despite significant opposition and counterrevolutionary interventions from the United States, until 1990, when Violeta Chamorro defeated the Sandinista candidate in an election.⁶⁴ The Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua was unique because, despite opposition from Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo of Managua, Christians, both clergy and laypeople, played a key role in the movement at both a grassroots and leadership level. Atheistic and Christian Marxists aligned to make the revolution possible and worked together after 1979 to run the government.⁶⁵

However, these movements of revolution and reform were met by strong opposition from wealthy political conservatives in Latin America and from the government of the United States. Operating in a Cold War mindset and ever wary of any potential communist threat, the U.S. Military and State Departments worked with Latin American militaries, training them in counterinsurgency techniques and promoting

⁶³ Vanden and Prevost, 59-60.
Lernoux, 24-28.

⁶⁴ Vanden and Prevost, 68-69.
Löwy and Pompan, 30-33.

⁶⁵ Löwy and Pompan, 37-40.

John Kirk, "John Paul II and the Exorcism of Liberation Theology: A Retrospective Look at the Pope in Nicaragua," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* (Vol. 4.1 1985: 33-47), 33-36.

national security policies that would strongly suppress Marxism. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson replaced the well-known Monroe Doctrine with his own Johnson Doctrine, asserting that the United States had the responsibility to intervene in Latin American politics to stop the spread of communism.⁶⁶ For the sake of its own political and economic interests, the United States backed many right-wing coups to overthrow revolutionary governments and invaded several countries to apprehend possible revolutions. As US Marine Corps Major General Smedley Butler put it:

I spent thirty-three years...being a high-class muscleman for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer for capitalism...I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers in 1909-1912. I helped make Mexico...safe for American oil interests in 1916. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for National City Bank boys to collect revenues. I helped in the rape of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street.⁶⁷

Vatican Interaction with Liberation Theology through the 1980s

Latin American conservatives and the United States were liberation theology's main political opponents, but on a religious and ideological front, liberation theology had to contend with and answer to the Vatican. As a movement within the Catholic Church, liberation theology had and still has to carefully toe the line between the authority of the

⁶⁶ Vanden and Prevost, 60, 63-64.

⁶⁷ Vanden and Prevost, 66; 54.

magisterium and the autonomy Latin American bishops desired for themselves and for the poor with whom they worked. Any time that a bishop or priest who practiced liberation theology challenged the hierarchy of the church, he risked losing his job. Liberation theologians learned to tread carefully and inevitably were met with mixed responses from others within the Church.

In the years directly following Vatican II, liberation theology was presented to a relatively open-minded Vatican under Pope Paul VI, John XXIII's successor, who actually encouraged the Latin American bishops to hold a hemispheric conference to integrate the spirit of Vatican II into their churches. This hemispheric conference became the famous CELAM meeting at Medellín where liberation theology got its official start.⁶⁸ As the Boff brothers explain, the Vatican's usual approach to any new theology is to at first remain neutral and detached.⁶⁹ Under Paul VI, the Vatican remained detached and let Latin America address its own unique issues, but when John Paul II became pope in 1978, the Vatican's approach changed. Having grown up in Poland and experienced communism as oppressive and harmful, John Paul II, in agreement with Trujillo and the conservative members of CELAM, saw liberation theology as Marxism infiltrating the Church and would have none of it.⁷⁰

The Vatican under John Paul II criticized liberation theology as reductionism and horizontalism. Critics claimed that while the liberation offered by Christ certainly contained economic, social, and political, elements, it was primarily spiritual and religious. Liberation theology, they claimed, carelessly reduced this all to political

⁶⁸ Lernoux, 32.

⁶⁹ Boffs, *Introduction*, 74-77.

⁷⁰ Löwy and Pompan, 28-30.

liberation.⁷¹ The reductionist and horizontalist arguments also maintained that liberation theology valued Jesus' teachings on earth over his ultimate sacrificial death and focused on the Kingdom of God as a purely earthly phenomenon, forgetting that it could be fully realized and perfected only in Heaven. Liberation theology preferred the partisan Jesus portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels who brings good news to the poor but bad news to the rich over the universal Christ described in Paul's letters who does not see these earthly differences in people. The Vatican rejected this image of Christ as unfairly partisan and ultimately un-Christian.⁷² Liberation theology's use of the exodus as an essential paradigm for liberation was also brought into question. The Vatican pointed out that Israel's history after the exodus still involved forty years of sinful disobedience in the desert and ultimately a bloody conquest of the Promised Land. They proposed as a better paradigm Jesus' willing sacrificial death that offered even his killers the opportunity for conversion.⁷³

In the 1980s, these theological points of dispute led to a more active Vatican persecution of the main participants in liberation theology. In 1983, after the victories of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, Pope John Paul II visited the country and publically criticized liberation theology and the priest-Sandinista Ernesto Cardenal. John Paul II argued that liberation theology used the foreign ideology of Marxism instead of traditional Christian teachings, a move that led to the abuse of individual rights, creation of hatred between classes, rejection of the authority of the hierarchal Church, and the

⁷¹ James Tunstead Burtchaell, "How Authentically Christian is Liberation Theology?" *The Review of Politics* (Vol. 50.2 1988: 264-281), 264-265.

⁷² John H. Yoder, "The Wider Setting of 'Liberation Theology,'" *The Review of Politics* (Vol. 52.2 1990: 285-296), 288-289.

Burtchaell, 267-272.

Cox, 41.

⁷³ Burtchaell, 272-274.

inappropriate participation of priests and bishops in the political arena.⁷⁴ John Paul II also, on many occasions, condemned CEBs as dangerous popular groups that opposed traditional ecclesiastical leadership and authority.⁷⁵

From 1984 to 1986, the conflict between the Vatican and liberation theology intensified. In 1984, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith who would later become Pope Benedict XVI, summoned author and liberation theologian Leonardo Boff of Brazil for a colloquy in Rome concerning unorthodox material in his 1981 book *Church: Charism and Power*. On September 3, 1984, the day after Boff arrived in Rome, Ratzinger published a brief document in the name of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith entitled *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation*.⁷⁶ This document offered a very bland acceptance of some of the theological ideas and concepts of liberation theology, but emphasized that the liberation that should be taught first and foremost by the Church was the liberation from sin offered by the death of Jesus Christ. It also cautioned against using ideologies foreign to Christianity, namely Marxism, integrated with Christian practices because use of such ideologies inevitably led to reductionism, atheism, and an undermining of human dignity.⁷⁷ Liberation theologians, including Boff, argued that this *Instruction* constructed an unrealistic picture of liberation theology, creating a straw-man argument which Ratzinger could easily refute. Frustrations were also voiced that the *Instruction* was

⁷⁴ Larry Rohter, "A Church Asunder Awaits the Pope in Salvador" (*New York Times* 4 Feb. 1996: 1). Kirk, 33-36.

⁷⁵ Levine, 254.

⁷⁶ Cox, 3-10.

⁷⁷ Joseph Card. Ratzinger, Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation,"* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, 1984), 17-20.

written in Rome and that no Latin American theologians were involved in its composition.⁷⁸

After his colloquy, Leonardo Boff was eventually silenced by the Vatican from May 9, 1985 to March 29, 1986. On April 5, 1986, a second *Instruction* written by Cardinal Ratzinger was published in the name of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith entitled *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*. This longer document, giving a more intellectual and thought-out appraisal of how the theme of liberation should be interpreted by the Catholic Church, was promised when the first *Instruction* was released.⁷⁹ It was more positively received than the 1984 *Instruction*, but presented many of the same claims: that liberation should be viewed as freedom from sin and personal freedom to act in the world and that one cannot, as the liberation theologians claimed to do, accept only certain aspects of Marxism without embracing it all and therefore denying the reality of God.⁸⁰

Boff's silencing and these two *Instructions* significantly curbed the growth of liberation theology and reduced it to a level at which the Vatican felt less threatened. The rest of the 1980s witnessed a stalemate in this theological battle. Cardinal Ratzinger continued to push for a conservative scholarly theology and maintained the belief that any problem in the Church had at its root an incorrect understanding of church doctrine which could be solved through orthodoxy, or "right-thinking."⁸¹ Liberation theologians, however, clung to their beliefs and practices and began using these two *Instructions* to

⁷⁸ Cox, 124-125.

⁷⁹ Cox, Silencing, 97-119

⁸⁰ Joseph Card. Ratzinger, Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, 1986) 12-14.

⁸¹ Cox, 77-84.

demonstrate Vatican support for their movement.⁸² They were unable to implement much growth or progress in the area of liberation theology, but throughout the 1980s it remained a contender on the theological stage. In the 1990s and 2000s, the opponents of liberation theology and factors undermining its growth would eventually get the better of it and lead to a significant decline in its presence and influence. It is to this decline and the reasons behind it that this discussion now turns.

⁸² Boffs, *Introduction*, 3-18, 37-38.

Chapter II: The Decline of Liberation Theology

The decline of liberation theology, which began in the 1980s but intensified in the 1990s-2000s, was the result of many interrelated factors. In this chapter, I seek to outline three essential reasons for liberation theology's decline in the last two decades: severe repression and censure from the Vatican, significant changes in the political climate of Latin America and the world as a whole, and the rise of Evangelical Protestantism⁸³ as a major competitor to Roman Catholicism in Latin American Christianity. A combination of these and other less significant factors slowly undermined the work of the men and women who started the movement and brought it to the diminished form it holds today.

Vatican Repression

As I've already mentioned, the 1980s were a period of contention and challenge between Vatican officials and proponents of liberation theology. John Kirk has proposed that at the core of this opposition was a tension between the emerging popular church focused on the needs of the marginalized and the unbending higher authority of the traditional Catholic Church distanced from and unable to understand Third-World Christianity.⁸⁴ From 1978 to the present, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI (previously Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, author of the Vatican *Instructions*) slowly quelled the influence of liberation theology through methods such as silencing, pastoral visits,

⁸³ Though many Latin Americans refer to all Protestant denominations as "evangelical," I mean to talk about "Evangelical Protestantism" as it is understood in the United States: a proselytizing, informally structured brand of Protestantism that emphasizes individual morality and a personal relationship with Jesus and often tends toward conservatism.

⁸⁴ Kirk, 41-44.

interference in CELAM conferences, and replacing liberation theologians with advocates of their own conservative theologies.

Along with the famous silencing of Leonardo Boff for remarks made in his 1981 book *Church: Charism and Power*⁸⁵ (see above), the Vatican, led by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, made significant efforts to censor and/or silence other influential Latin American thinkers, the most well-known of whom was Gustavo Gutiérrez, liberation theology's proclaimed "founder." In 1983, Cardinal Ratzinger called Gutiérrez to a colloquy in Rome, much like the one Leonardo Boff would endure a year later, in an effort to condemn his liberationist views. Gutiérrez, however, refused to go, and the Peruvian bishops rallied around him and were able to defuse the Vatican's condemnation.⁸⁶ In 1999, when conservative Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani Thorne was named Archbishop of Lima, Peru, Gutiérrez left the diocesan priesthood for the Dominican order so that Cipriani would not have the power to silence him. However, he could not escape controversy in his home country and eventually exiled himself to the United States, where he is currently the John Cardinal O'Hara Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame.⁸⁷

John Paul II's pastoral visits to South and Central America also served as outlets for the Vatican to express its criticism of liberation theology and impose harsher restrictions on its opponents. Pope John Paul II, born Karol Wojtyła, lived in Poland during its period of oppressive, Soviet-style communism. Witnessing first-hand the evils of this flawed government, he became a strong opponent of communism as a government philosophy and helped form a trade union called Solidarity, the first independent trade

⁸⁵ Cox, 2-9.

⁸⁶ Smith, *Emergence*, 225.

⁸⁷ Larry Rohter, "Peru's Catholics Brace for Fissures in the Church," *New York Times* (8 May 2005: 8).

union in the communist world. This organization and his personal work were instrumental in the fall of Polish communism, which in turn eventually led to the fall of the whole East Bloc.⁸⁸ Though he recognized unrestrained, free-market capitalism to be an unjust system that often violated the teachings of Jesus and Catholic social teaching, he regularly proclaimed communism the worse of the two systems.⁸⁹

Given his painful history with communism, it is no surprise that John Paul II was skeptical about if not outright opposed to liberation theology from his assumption of the papacy in 1978. He forcefully rejected its use of Marxism, declaring, as Cardinal Ratzinger wrote in both *Instructions*, that such an atheistic system was incompatible with Christianity. John Paul II was also wary of the concept of a popular church movement, claiming that groups like CEBs were too autonomous and did not rely enough on the magistrate, the only true mediator of Christ's church.⁹⁰ As Michael Novak wrote in 1986, "From the beginning of his pontificate, step by step, piece by piece, Pope John Paul II has built a theological case against liberation theology."⁹¹

Along with endorsing the two *Instructions* and being the official voice behind all Vatican silencings and condemnations, John Paul II expressed his viewpoint to the general public of Latin America through his pastoral visits. During his papacy (1978-2005), John Paul II visited nearly every country in Latin America at least once. He visited some, like Mexico and Brazil, four or five times.⁹² During these visits he met with important leaders, made speeches, and presided over Masses, giving him the

⁸⁸ Scott Appleby, "John Paul II," *Foreign Policy* (Vol. 119 2000: 12-25), 12-13

⁸⁹ Pope John Paul II, "Pope John Paul II on Contemporary Development," *Population and Development Review* (Vol. 17.3 1991: 553-561), 553-561.

⁹⁰ Levine, 252-254.

⁹¹ Smith, *Emergence*, 223.

⁹² *The Holy See*, <http://www.vatican.va/phome_en.htm>, 12 Feb. 2009.

opportunity to communicate his vision of the Christian life, including his reservations about liberation theology, to millions of Latin American Christians.⁹³ Most notable among these were two visits to Nicaragua, one in 1983 under the rule of the socialist Sandinista government, and one in 1996, when the presidency had been won back by the more moderate and capitalist Constitutionalist Liberal Party under the president Violeta Chamorro.⁹⁴ In 1983, along with Nicaragua, John Paul II visited Costa Rica, Panama, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and Haiti. While in these other countries, which had not successfully undergone Marxist revolutions, he preached a message of respect for social justice, human rights, and peace, his sermon in Nicaragua was entitled “Church Unity” and called the people of Latin America to Christian obedience, promoting the hierarchal Church of Rome and denouncing any form of dissent. He warned the Nicaraguan people not to take up ideologies alien to Christianity and, in a 1984 letter, condemned the “sector of the Church that has become dependent on materialist ideology.”⁹⁵ His words, which seemed to legitimize counterrevolutionary action in Nicaragua, proved divisive, leading to a shouting match between Sandinistas and hierarchy supporters. In the wake of his visit, conservative bishops, particularly Archbishop Obando y Bravo, were inspired to actively speak out against the Sandinista government and in support of the counterrevolutionaries, which contributed to the eventual defeat of the Sandinistas in the 1990 elections.⁹⁶ In contrast, John Paul II’s sermon from his 1996 visit proclaimed Nicaragua to be in a time of much-needed peace after the revolution and predicted a bright future for the country, regardless of the fact

⁹³ Sam Dillon, “A Rebel Creed, Stifled by the Pope, Flickers Still,” *New York Times* (21 Jan. 1999: A4).

⁹⁴ Julia Preston, “Pope Returns in Jubilation and Triumph to Nicaragua,” *New York Times* (8 Feb. 1996: A14).

⁹⁵ Kirk, 37-44.

⁹⁶ Kirk, 37-44.

that it was still facing a devastating economic crisis caused by capitalism and neoliberal economics.⁹⁷

John Paul II also had the opportunity to promote his views among Latin American clergy at the 1992 CELAM conference in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. Though John Paul II employed the popular liberationist language from the Medellín and Puebla conferences, he spiritualized them, as Cardinal Ratzinger had in the *Instructions*, emptying them of any politically liberating meaning. John Paul II named secularism and modern culture as the biggest threats to the Church instead of the poverty and social injustice with which liberation theologians were concerned.⁹⁸ Santo Domingo is often considered a Vatican victory over liberation theology, resulting in a nearly complete reversal of the Church reforms enacted by Medellín. The “preferential option for the poor” was quelled and replaced by a triumphalist evangelical conquest of Latin America.⁹⁹

Along with his personal influence, John Paul II used his Vatican power to replace bishops who endorsed liberation theology with his own conservative followers as the former bishops either retired or were removed. While this happened all across Latin America, two of the best known instances occurred in El Salvador and in Brazil. In 1995, John Paul II appointed conservative Archbishop Fernando Sáenz Lacalle as the new archbishop of San Salvador, a position formerly held by liberation theology hero and martyr, Archbishop Oscar Romero. Early in his time as Archbishop, Sáenz chose to accept money from the very government that had been responsible for Romero’s

⁹⁷ Preston 1996.

⁹⁸ Peter Steinfels, “Latin Bishops Reopen Debate on Church Role,” *New York Times* (13 Oct. 1992: A10).

⁹⁹ Löwy and Pompan, 41.

murder.¹⁰⁰ Archbishop Sáenz continued with the Pope's strategy when he dismissed Reverend Luis Alonso Coto from his seminary post because of his leftist political leanings.¹⁰¹ Another earlier example of this policy had occurred in Brazil in 1985 when Dom Hélder Câmara, Archbishop of Recife and so-called "friend of the poor," retired and was replaced by conservative Dom José Cardoso.¹⁰² A 1989 quote by James Brooke, prominent *New York Times* reporter of the time, accurately describes the effects of this replacement:

Archbishop Cardoso is now dismantling the work of his predecessor...In the last eighteen months, the human rights office of the archdiocese has been closed, the land rights office has been purged of militants, the Church's Commission of Peace and Justice has been ordered not to speak in the name of the archdiocese, and two liberation theology seminaries founded by Archbishop Câmara have been ordered to close their doors. Priests associated with liberation theology are no longer invited to celebrate Masses on television.¹⁰³

In 2001 in Peru, Gustavo Gutiérrez's home country, John Paul II appointed Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani Thorne, a member of the ultra-conservative organization Opus Dei, as the Archbishop of Lima.¹⁰⁴ Opus Dei, an organization founded in 1928 by

¹⁰⁰ Rohter, "Assunder," 1996.

¹⁰¹ Preston, 1996.

¹⁰² Laurie Goodstein, "Helder Câmara, 90, Defender of Poor, Dies," *New York Times* (30 Aug. 1999: A17).

¹⁰³ Smith, *Emergence*, 223-224.

¹⁰⁴ Lydia Polgreen and Larry Rohter, "Third World is New Factor in Succession," *New York Times* (5 Apr. 2005: A1).

Spanish priest Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer and brought into the public eye by Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), started as a cult of same-sex celibate groups famous for generously paying their leaders and participating in self-flagellation. Proponents of liberation theology strongly criticized this movement because of its alignment with the elite and military at the expense of social justice and human rights for all and feared the power of Opus Dei's conservative influence in Church leadership. Just as they had expected, Cipriani began his crusade against the religious left early in his term as he made an effort to take control of Peruvian religious education from the liberal Jesuits by removing them, one by one, from their seminary posts.¹⁰⁵

Though theoretically the presence of bishops supporting liberation theology was not essential for CEBs and other community organizing at the grassroots level, it was nearly impossible for pastoral agents to maintain these groups under the active disapproval of conservative bishops. Grassroots liberation theology was also faced with a difficult situation of government oppression. As liberation theology lost its last vestiges of Vatican support, military governments could much more easily persecute and repress movement leaders because these movements had less direct support from the popular institution of the Church.¹⁰⁶

When Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, liberation theology lost what little hope it may have had of regaining Vatican approval. The Catholic Church found itself in the hands of a very academically minded man who considered secularism, the presence of other religious traditions, and feminism to be the

¹⁰⁵ Rohter, "Fissures", 2005.

¹⁰⁶ Smith, *Emergence*, 224.

greatest dangers facing the Church when he assumed the papacy.¹⁰⁷ A long-time opponent of liberation theology and author of both *Instructions*, he had openly criticized the World Council of Churches for any aid provided to liberation theology, which he termed “a subversive movement in Latin American.”¹⁰⁸ With Pope Benedict XVI preoccupied with fighting modern secularism and religious pluralism, liberation theology was virtually silenced by the Vatican as what Sam Dillon of the *New York Times* called a “rebel creed.”¹⁰⁹

Changes in the Political Climate of Latin America

Along with this forceful Vatican repression, the last two decades brought several significant changes in the political climate of Latin America in particular and the world as a whole. Most important among these were the worldwide failure of socialism, the particular failures of socialism within Latin America, and the rise of Latin American democracy.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the official fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 are considered the end of the world’s first experiments with socialism and communism. Capitalism triumphed in Eastern Europe and countries worldwide reverted to the “trickle-down” economic theory as the best solution to poverty.¹¹⁰ Those who had lived previously under oppressive communist governments experienced great liberation, yet it was a liberation from the very political systems that liberation theology espoused.

¹⁰⁷ Ian Fisher, “German Cardinal is Chosen as Pope,” *New York Times* (20 Apr. 2005: A1).

¹⁰⁸ Larry Rohter, “In Selection of New Pope, Third World Loses Out,” *New York Times* (20 Apr. 2005: A13).

¹⁰⁹ Alessandra Stanley, “Crossing Cardinal Nein” *New York Times* (24 Apr. 2005: C1).
Dillon 1999.

¹¹⁰ Vanden and Prevost, 69.

Though liberation theologians rightly claimed that they had never been in support of the “centralized, authoritarian socialism” of the Soviet Union, socialism as a whole had lost its credibility and liberation theologians had found themselves unable to provide a viable and successful socialist alternative.¹¹¹

Within Latin America, socialist and communist governments witnessed their own failures. In the years following the Puebla CELAM conference, two significant Marxist revolutions broke out in Central America: the Sandinista Front of National Liberation in Nicaragua, which successfully overthrew the Somoza dynasty in 1979, and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front in El Salvador, which was nearly successful in 1981. Both of these revolutions received much support from proponents of liberation theology and the conscientized CEBs. The success in Nicaragua was initially viewed as a liberation theology breakthrough, but in the years to follow, the Sandinista government was unable to significantly improve the Nicaraguan economy or quality of life.¹¹² In fact, the 1980s were a time of significant economic trouble in Latin America as a whole, some of which, it was argued, could trace its roots to socialist experiments supported by liberation theology.¹¹³ While this failure may have had less to do with the policies of the socialist governments than the forceful intervention of the United States on the behalf of counterrevolutionaries and neoliberal economic policies,¹¹⁴ it was discouraging to the Latin American people and signified to many the failure of Latin American socialism.

¹¹¹ Smith, *Emergence*, 229.

Anthony Gill, “The Study of Liberation Theology: What’s Next?” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (Vol. 41.1 2002: 87-89), 87-89.

¹¹² Smith, *Emergence*, 227-228.

¹¹³ Smith, *Emergence*, 228-229.

¹¹⁴ Vanden and Prevost, 69.

Along with witnessing these unsuccessful revolutions, many liberation theologians in the late 1980s and 1990s began to question the legitimacy of the dependency theory and the validity of their own use of Marxism. In the introduction to his 1988 revised English edition of *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez conceded that his beloved dependency theory had proven itself inadequate to explain the full complexity of Latin American poverty. He also called into question his earlier claim that socialism was the only possible government under which true liberation could occur. While this mental flexibility and willingness to correct and adapt their theology according to the times was and continues to be a great asset of liberation theologians, Christian Smith, author of *The Emergence of Liberation Theology*, raises the pressing question that if dependency theory and socialism are removed from liberation theology, how then is it different from the reformist theologies of the 1960s that liberation theologians had claimed were insufficient to address mass poverty?¹¹⁵

Along with the failure of socialism in Latin America came the successful rise of democracy. In the 1980s alone, Peru, Honduras, Argentina, Brazil, Guatemala, Chile, Paraguay, and Panama all experienced a shift from military rule to civilian democracies.¹¹⁶ As this shift continued in the next two decades, liberation theology's influence in the political arena declined. Several theories attempt to describe the effect that the general success of Latin American democracy had on liberation theology.

One theory claims that liberation theology was successful in achieving its goals and therefore was no longer necessary in Latin America after the end of the 1980s. Daniel Levine predicted in 1988 that as the oppressive structure that created liberation

¹¹⁵ Smith, *Emergence*, 229-230.

¹¹⁶ Smith, *Emergence*, 230-231.

theology declined, so would the theology itself decline as well. He claimed that if the trend toward democracy and civilian rule continued, the Church would no longer be the only advocate for the poor, leading to liberation theology's natural and healthy waning.¹¹⁷ In the words of Rigoberta Menchú, a Guatemalan peasant awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 for her work in fighting injustice and poverty, "Liberation theology comes to areas of the poor. When standards of living increase, it dies away."¹¹⁸ With the need for social justice less pressing, the Church returned to the realm of the spiritual.¹¹⁹

However, this theory is highly problematic. Though the shift from military rule to civilian democracy was a positive one, the quality of life for Latin American peasants changed very little. While it brought about a theoretically more just political system, this shift was a far cry from the sweeping reforms and revolution for which liberation theologians had called. However, under a democratic government, liberation theology became far less compelling than it had under military rule. Moderate reformist theology regained popularity and plausibility within democratic systems in which people could advocate for their needs.¹²⁰

Just as they had acknowledged the inadequacy of the dependency theory and the inability of socialist revolution to accomplish their goals, liberation theologians also rethought their original positions on electoral democracy. In the early 1970s, liberation theologians had criticized democracy as a "fraudulent mechanism of bourgeois rule," but with the rise of civilian governments in the 1980s and 1990s, they began to advocate "participatory democracy" as the popular control of politics for which they had been

¹¹⁷ Levine, 260.

¹¹⁸ Herndl and Bauer, 564-566.

¹¹⁹ Daudelin and Hewitt, 224-225.

¹²⁰ Smith, *Emergence*, 231.

striving from the beginning. Hugo Assman, one of liberation theology's most Marxist proponents, changed his perspective from one of Marxist revolution to a call to create liberal democracies that would work on behalf of the poor.¹²¹ While some may consider this vacillating opinion a flaw of liberation theology, I argue that it once again points to the adaptability and mental flexibility of the movement. The liberation theologians' ultimate goal was to improve the plight of the poor, and anything that moved them toward that goal was in their eyes a success. However, regardless of whether or not liberation theology moved closer to accomplishing its goals, as an independent movement it suffered greatly from the political shifts of the 1980s and 1990s.

The Rise of Evangelical Protestantism

Another less obvious but arguably more influential reason for the decline of liberation theology was the rise of Evangelical Protestantism in Latin America in the 1990s and 2000s and the threat it posed to the Roman Catholic Church. Mainline Protestantism had existed in Latin America for many years but in a small and insignificant magnitude. Most were Lutherans and Moravians from Europe and had an appeal only among the small middle class associated with postcolonial political regimes. Protestantism as a whole but especially in Latin America had been viewed by many Roman Catholics as a significant threat that must be countered. Spanish priest Jaime Balmes wrote in the nineteenth century that Protestantism, in its individualistic nature, was "the deviation of the right order of human social relationships."¹²² There were a few instances of overlap between liberation theology and Latin American Protestantism; in

¹²¹ Smith, *Emergence*, 231-232.

¹²² William H. Swatos Jr., "On Latin American Protestantism," *Sociology of Religion* (Vol. 55.2 1994: 197-205), 197-201.

the early 1960s, the organization Church and Society in Latin America (ISAL), led by Presbyterian missionary Richard Shaull, came up with a “theology of revolution” similar to liberation theology, which served as a minor ecumenical ally to liberation theology.¹²³ However, as a whole, Protestantism had never had much of a presence in Latin America.

This all changed in the 1990s when Pentecostalism and Evangelical Protestantism began to flourish in Latin America.¹²⁴ In 1960, 4% of Latin Americans self-identified as Protestant; by 1993, the number had tripled to 12%.¹²⁵ When Pope John Paul II visited Brazil in 1980, 500,000 people came out to celebrate the Mass. In contrast, for his 1991 Mass, only 100,000 attended. On the same day of the 1991 Mass, Brazil’s most popular Protestant televangelist was able to draw a crowd of 400,000 to various outdoor prayer meetings around the country.¹²⁶ By 2000, only 75% of Brazil self-identified as Catholic, down from 90% in 1979, with some people predicting a Protestant majority by 2025.¹²⁷

One reason for this surge in Evangelical Protestant success had to do with a shortage of Catholic priests in Latin America, as Pope John Paul II acknowledged at the 1992 CELAM conference in Santo Domingo.¹²⁸ In 1993 the Roman Catholic Church had one priest for every 10,350 parishioners. In contrast, the Evangelical Protestant ratio of clergy to church members was one to 1,000. Part of this was simply a practical issue: training to become a Pentecostal or Evangelical minister took less than one year, while the process of becoming a Catholic priest took at least eight. However, much of this also had to do with the increasing success of evangelical missionaries.¹²⁹

¹²³ Smith, *Emergence*, 17.

¹²⁴ Gill, 87-89.

¹²⁵ James Brookes, “Pragmatic Protestants Winning Converts in Brazil,” *New York Times* (4 Jul. 1993: 1).

¹²⁶ Brookes 1993.

¹²⁷ Polgreen and Rohter 2000.

¹²⁸ Peter Steinfels, “Shepherds, or Wolves? Whatever, Flocks Grow,” *New York Times* (27 Oct. 1992: A4).

¹²⁹ Brookes 1993.

This evangelical missionary success in Latin America was in part due to the way they raised funds and support. Mainline Protestant and Catholic churches, whose numbers were decreasing worldwide, had a difficult time raising money within their congregations. In contrast, Evangelicals and Pentecostals raised their own support through direct contact and personal communication with individual donors, making their supporters feel much more a part of the mission. Once in Latin America, Evangelical Protestants used a pyramid structure to set up new churches: Latin American converts were trained as ministers and sent out to found their own congregations. Free from the bureaucracy of Catholicism and mainline denominations, Evangelical missionaries were considered “ecclesiastical entrepreneurs,” able to win supporters and converts through capitalist marketing techniques.¹³⁰

While Evangelical Protestantism in Latin America was no monolith, it had several defining characteristics in which it differed significantly from liberation theology. The first was that while liberation theology supported many leftist movements, Evangelical Protestantism nearly always favored the political right.¹³¹ It was characterized by a literal, fundamental interpretation of the Bible and personal experience of the Holy Spirit, the second of which was virtually non-existent in traditional Catholicism and liberation theology.¹³² As sociologist Max Weber pointed out in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Protestantism, particularly of the evangelical variety, brought with it an individualistic value system and an emphasis on personal autonomy unfamiliar to many Latin American Catholics. In fact, some strains of Evangelical Protestantism brought to Latin America an anti-Catholic sentiment and outright rejection of many

¹³⁰ Swatos, 203-204.

¹³¹ Daudelin and Hewitt, 229-232.

¹³² Brookes 1993.

Roman Catholic teachings.¹³³ In contrast to liberation theology's focus on salvation in this world, Evangelical Protestantism's other-worldly, heaven-centered theology was a welcome relief to oppressive military leaders and conservatives, who easily embraced it and used its central tenet of enduring suffering in this life for the sake of happiness in the next to their advantage.¹³⁴

The response of the Catholic Church to this influx of Evangelical Protestants was largely one of fear and defensiveness. Evangelical Protestantism threatened the central authority of the Catholic Church and its monopoly in Latin American religion.¹³⁵ At the 1992 CELAM Conference in Santo Domingo, Pope John Paul II spoke out against Evangelical Protestantism as a growing threat of "rapacious wolves" from whom the Catholic Church must protect its flock. Referring to Protestant missionaries, particularly from the United States, John Paul II stated,

We must not underestimate a certain strategy whose objective is to weaken the links that unite the countries of Latin America and in this way erode the strength born of unity. Important economic resources are allocated toward this goal, to finance proselytizing campaigns aimed at destroying Catholic unity.¹³⁶

In an effort to retain its influence in Latin American society and win back lost converts, the dominant voice of the Roman Catholic Church shifted quickly back to a conservative,

¹³³ Swatos, 203-204.

¹³⁴ Steinfels, "Wolves," 1992.

¹³⁵ Daudelin and Hewitt, 229-232.

¹³⁶ Steinfels, "Wolves," 1992.

spiritualist theology, abandoning the earthly and political worldviews liberation theology had proposed.¹³⁷ Latin American bishops were also encouraged to evangelize to followers of the Afro-Brazilian religions Candomblé and Macumba, whose systems of deities are often synthesized with the Catholic concept of saints.¹³⁸

However, the Catholic Church's strongest and most dynamic response to the threat of Evangelical Protestantism was the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR), a Catholic lay movement modeled on the very Charismatic and Pentecostal movements threatening the Church. R. Andrew Chesnut describes the CCR as "a Catholic lay movement that seeks to revitalize the Church through the power of the third person of the Holy Spirit."¹³⁹ The CCR copied the strategies of Pentecostalism and Evangelical Protestantism, emphasizing a personal experience of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, and rock-style worship instead of the traditional Mass.¹⁴⁰ Lay groups that for years had been CEBs were transformed into groups for Charismatic renewal.¹⁴¹ To a certain extent, this movement was successful: it won back many Catholics and helped increase the number of Latin American priests, part of the Catholic weakness that had allowed Evangelical Protestantism to grow into the movement that it did.¹⁴²

However, on the whole, Evangelical Protestantism was successful in replacing Catholicism, particularly liberation theology, as the religion of the poor masses. Latin American peasants were drawn to Evangelical and Pentecostal sects because they offered promises of great spiritual wealth and happiness in the eternal life to come in exchange

¹³⁷ Daudelin and Hewitt, 233-234.

Drogus, 470-472.

¹³⁸ Polgreen and Rohter 2000.

¹³⁹ Andrew R. Chesnut, "A Preferential Option for the Spirit: The Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Latin America's New Religious Economy," *Latin American Politics and Society* (Vol. 45.1 2003: 55-85), 55-61.

¹⁴⁰ Polgreen and Rohter 2000.

¹⁴¹ Daudelin and Hewitt, 229-232.

¹⁴² Chesnut, 56.

for pious suffering through life on earth. Such a promise seemed much more relevant and reasonable to Latin American Christians than the grand calls for social revolution and establishing the Kingdom of God on earth that liberation theology heralded.¹⁴³ In some cases, the upper and middle classes clung to liberation theology while the poor masses moved on to “pragmatic” Protestantism, which was more compatible with capitalism, the economic system that seemed to have won the day.¹⁴⁴ Hierarchical Catholicism was replaced by more egalitarian Evangelical Protestantism.¹⁴⁵ As Cecilia Mariz wrote, CEBs and Pentecostal groups served similar social functions as outlets of popular religion for their adherents, but the Latin American poor, desperate for news of hope, opted for the safe spiritualism of Protestantism instead of the political, action-oriented call of liberation theology’s CEBs.¹⁴⁶ At the end of the day, the “preferential option for the spirit” overpowered the “preferential option for the poor.”

All that said, while many of the bishops at the 1979 CELAM conference in Puebla believed that liberation theology would be the new face of Latin American Christianity, in two decades it had diminished to nearly nothing. This occurred mostly as a result of Vatican repression, particularly under Pope John Paul II with the help of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the fall of socialism and rise of democracy in Latin America, and the threat posed by Latin America’s newest ecclesiastical movement: Evangelical Protestantism. However, though these and other factors nearly succeeded in eliminating liberation theology from the religious and political scene, important remnants of the movement still exist today that could, under the right circumstances, lead to a

¹⁴³ Polgreen and Rohter 2005.

¹⁴⁴ Brookes 1993.

¹⁴⁵ Steinfelds “Wolves,” 1992.

¹⁴⁶ Swatos, 202.
Drogus, 468-469.

revitalization of the movement. Let us now turn to examine liberation theology's current state, its prospects for the future, and the ways in which it has changed the course of Latin American history.

Chapter III: The Present State of Liberation Theology and its Impact on Latin America

As we come to the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, it is clear that liberation theology's visible influence has declined, and many theologians, both clergy and secular scholars, have come to the conclusion that Latin American liberation theology has either failed, run its course, or both. It is no longer the dominant movement among the Latin American poor masses, having been surpassed by Evangelical Protestantism in the 1990s, and the majority of its clergy leaders have been removed from their positions by a conservative Vatican. The fall of Soviet Communism has left many wondering if the socialism liberation theology proposes ever had the potential to be a practical reality.

However, in their 1986 *Introduction to Liberation Theology*, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff remind their readers that liberation theology is primarily a situational and historical theology meant to be evaluated in different socio-historic contexts so that eventually "liberation theology" will no longer be spoken of, for it will have made itself an integral part of all theology.¹⁴⁷ Although these words were written in 1986, they provide a fair assessment of liberation theology today: as the socio-historical circumstances of Latin America have changed over the past few decades, so has liberation theology evolved and adapted, leaving its mark on Latin America in ways that may not be obvious to the casual observer. In the following pages, I will examine liberation theology's survival and legacy in Latin America, focusing on its development of the Latin American popular church through CEBs, the historical projects it has

¹⁴⁷ Boffs, *Introduction*, 91-92.

launched and inspired, particularly those concerning sustainable development, and the leftward political shift Latin America as a whole has taken in the last ten years. Next, I will turn to recent developments in the movement within the Catholic Church that still self-identifies as liberation theology, both in its interactions with the Vatican and in the writings, actions, and theological claims of modern-day liberation theologians.

CEBs and the Latin American Popular Church

Base Ecclesial Communities (CEBs, from Spanish) have been at the center of liberation theology from its origins in the 1950s and 1960s to the present day. In practice, they are small groups of ten to thirty people, the majority of whom are usually poor, directly connected to the Catholic Church. Both ecclesiological and political in nature, these groups remain at the very bottom of all Church and/or state hierarchy and simply come together to study Scripture and participate in grassroots action toward a concrete end.¹⁴⁸ There is uncertainty among scholars as to how CEBs officially got their start,¹⁴⁹ but many, including Daniel Levine and James Tunstead Burtchaell, claim that CEBs originated as lay-led religious groups within the Church that organized because of the shortage of Catholic priests in Latin America. Burtchaell goes so far as to argue that liberation theology did not create CEBs, but CEBs created liberation theology, as many who would later become great liberation theologians got their start in grassroots CEBs.¹⁵⁰ Once liberation theology began to gain momentum in the 1960s, liberation theologians, clergy, and lay-leaders brought political agendas and social causes to these originally purely religious groups. As a result of both the leaders' charismatic appeal and CEB

¹⁴⁸ Levine, 251.

¹⁴⁹ Roelofs, 558-560.

¹⁵⁰ Burtchaell, 266-267.

members' personal experiences of oppression, CEBs often adopted these agendas into their activities and religious worldviews and became ground-level champions of their own causes.¹⁵¹ The CEBs that have best endured are those that have become autonomously functioning communities, led by lay members instead of clergy. These CEBs have been able to continue their religious, political, and social work even after their charismatic leaders were killed, persecuted, or removed by totalitarian governments or the Vatican.¹⁵²

As religious, political, and social groups, CEBs nurture their members in many different ways and serve a variety of functions in the lives of their larger communities. In the area of religion, CEBs bring Christianity down from a distant hierarchy to a personal level relevant to the Latin American poor. They foster feelings of love, strength, and self-worth in a population that society has often ignored.¹⁵³ CEBs put religion in the hands of ordinary people in such a way that they can begin to truly see themselves as “the Church,” and from there, Daniel Levine argues, find empowerment to act not only on a religious level but on social and political levels as well.¹⁵⁴

Conscientization is another important element of the mission of CEBs. This is an educational strategy developed in the 1960s by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in which CEB leaders demonstrate to the oppressed that their fate is not inevitable but rather is a human social product put into place and maintained by the rich majority.¹⁵⁵ CEB members are reminded that because their oppression is caused by their fellow humans

¹⁵¹ Levine, 254-255.

¹⁵² Levine, 255-257.

¹⁵³ Drogus, 469-470.

¹⁵⁴ Levine, 252-254.

¹⁵⁵ Christian Smith, “The Spirit and Democracy: Base Communities, Protestantism, and Democratization in Latin America,” *Sociology of Religion* (Vol. 55.2 1994: 119-143), 123.

and not by God, they have the ability to improve their own social conditions and work toward a more just society. Along with raising consciousness, CEBs provide literacy training and opportunities for self-expression through various mediums, including art and music.¹⁵⁶ While a CEB empowers the group as a whole, Daniel Levine asserts that CEBs also should and do individually empower members in such a way that they may emerge as individuals with the motivation and skills necessary to spur changes in religious, political, and social life.¹⁵⁷

A component of CEBs that has come more recently to scholarly attention is their ability to mobilize political activism toward the egalitarian and participatory principles of democracy. As I mentioned above, formative liberation theologians of the 1960s and 1970s saw the collectivist, socialist implications of liberation theology as incompatible with democracy, but the political circumstances of the 1990s brought many liberation theologians to reevaluate and eventually advocate fully participatory democracy. As liberation theology and democracy were reconciled, it became apparent to many that several aspects of CEBs are particularly useful in fostering participatory democracy. In his article “The Spirit of Democracy: Base Communities, Protestantism, and Democratization in Latin America” (1994), Christian Smith outlines six ways in particular that CEBs serve as a breeding ground for democracy.¹⁵⁸

First of all, CEBs create what Smith calls “open spaces” for group political organization and participation in what had long been an exclusive and elitist society. Second, the conscientization of the poor encourages “engaged criticism” in which the poor better understand the reasons for their oppression and the ways in which each can

¹⁵⁶ Herndl and Bauer, 566-568.

¹⁵⁷ Levine, 260-270.

¹⁵⁸ Smith, “Democracy,” 120-127.

individually work to overcome it. Third, CEBs operate as “micro-democracies” that give their members the opportunity to observe on a small scale how democratic government works and allows them to develop the organization, communication, and leadership skills necessary to be active participants in democracy. Fourth, CEBs instill in their members a sense of responsibility for the state of society and history, calling them to be the subjects of history and not merely its objects. Fifth, CEBs mobilize direct political action in groups such as labor unions and political parties, and sixth, CEBs offer what Smith calls a “power-base” for already existing political parties, encouraging Latin American political parties to operate in a “bottom up” manner instead of the “top down” method they have used for so long.¹⁵⁹

Though CEB numbers have certainly declined from the 1970s, hundreds of thousands of groups still exist across the continent.¹⁶⁰ According to Leonardo Boff’s 2009 article for the Argentine paper *Argenpress*, nearly 100,000 CEBs currently exist in Brazil alone.¹⁶¹ When Pope John Paul II visited El Salvador in 1996, Larry Rohter of the *New York Times* reported that liberation theologians and priests considered their job to be continued work on the level of CEBs and local parishes to further their cause of social justice for the oppressed.¹⁶² In 1999 in Mexico, Sam Dillon reported that liberation theology’s legacy in Latin America continued through human rights organizations, polling groups, and other civic organizations whose leaders had learned to read and

¹⁵⁹ Smith, “Democracy,” 122-125.

¹⁶⁰ James Rowe, “Liberation Theology Lives On,” *Foreign Policy in Focus* (15 Nov. 2007 <<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/4729>>).

¹⁶¹ Leonardo Boff, “La teología de la liberación se proponga, pese el veto del Vaticano,” *ArgenPress* (19 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.argenpress.info/2009/03/la-teologia-de-la-liberacion-se-propaga.html>>).

¹⁶² Rohter, “Assunder,” 1996.

think critically in CEBs.¹⁶³ In 2005 in Peru, despite the choice of Cardinal Cipriani as Archbishop of Lima, a minority population of CEBs still existed and operated, refusing to abandon their cause.¹⁶⁴ At the fifth CELAM Conference, inaugurated May 13, 2007 in Aparecida, Brazil,¹⁶⁵ CEBs were praised and encouraged to “recapture the experiences of the first [Christian] communities as described in the Acts of the Apostles.”¹⁶⁶ Most recently, in the 2009 World Forum on Theology and Liberation held in Belem, Brazil, Mary E. Hunt reported that many CEB leaders were present to advocate their causes and learn how to better serve their people.¹⁶⁷ Though not as visible as they were in the 1960s to 1980s, CEBs continue to exist in large numbers across Latin America and to serve as an integral part of the Latin American Church.

The last half-century has witnessed an immense change in the philosophy, ecclesiastical structure, and character of the Latin American Church. What was until just recently a patriarchal and imperialist European institution has been drastically altered to a more unique system based on the culture of Latin America itself. It would be impossible to speak of the Latin American Church without reference to CEBs or small, egalitarian, CEB-like communities. CEBs are no monolith or super-imposed system, but are rather a network of individual groups working toward unique purposes¹⁶⁸ that, by their very nature, have changed the face of Latin American Christianity from a hierarchal Church centered in Rome to a popular Church centered in local communities.

¹⁶³ Dillon, 1999.

¹⁶⁴ Rohter, “Fissures,” 2005.

¹⁶⁵ Teófilo Cabestrero, “The Primacy of the Poor in the Mission of Jesus and the Church,” *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross: Christology of Liberation* (Ed. José María Vigil. Online Book: International Theological Commission of EATWOT, 2007), 45.

¹⁶⁶ Rowe 2007.

¹⁶⁷ Mary E. Hunt, “Liberation Theology is Alive and Well,” *Religion Dispatches* (16 Feb. 2009 <http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/religionandtheology/1112/liberation_theology_is_alive_and_well/>).

¹⁶⁸ Levine, 254-255.

Sustainable Development and Historical Projects

Liberation theology can also be found in many of the social justice efforts and programs currently underway in Latin America. While life in Latin America has undergone significant change since liberation theology began, the living conditions have hardly improved. Although the percentage of the population living in a rural setting has dropped from 58.4% in 1950 to 25% in 2006, more than 60% of the rural population in Latin America was still living in poverty.¹⁶⁹ In 2008, *The Economist* reported that in Paraguay, 1% of the population owned 77% of the land.¹⁷⁰ 44% of the urban population lives in slums and shantytowns known as *favelas* in Brazil and *barriadas* or *pueblos* in Spanish-speaking Latin America. These slums often have no running water, sewer, trash collection, or electricity, and the crime and violence rates continue to skyrocket.¹⁷¹

While the socialism originally advocated by liberation theologians has lost much of its credibility, the negative consequences of capitalism driven by neoliberal economic theory are undeniable and blatantly call for change. Liberation theologians are responding to this call in many ways, and two of the most prevalent are interrelated: projects for sustainable development and environmental advocacy. I will outline both below.

Sustainable development, as defined by Edward J. Martin, is “a standard of equity, rooted in cultural values, that prioritizes the rights of the people to use natural resources democratically and secure basic needs over economic effectiveness and efficiency.”¹⁷² Put more simply by the Brundtland Commission Report of 1992, *Our*

¹⁶⁹ Vanden and Prevost, 12.

¹⁷⁰ “The Next Leftist on the Block,” *The Economist* (9 Aug. 2008: 35), 35.

¹⁷¹ Vanden and Prevost, 12-13.

¹⁷² Martin, 83.

Common Future, it is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”¹⁷³ After having experienced the ineffectiveness of trying to fully restructure the government, liberation theology leaders such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino are working fervently with sustainable development projects in hopes that they might be a postmodern grassroots solution to poverty.¹⁷⁴

In line with the Brundtland Commission Report, liberation theologians promoting sustainable development advocate “intergenerational equity (fairness to posterity) and intragenerational equity (fairness to contemporaries)”¹⁷⁵ as the Global South inevitably develops. As Martin explains, sustainable development is a healthy and environmentally conscious response to the hazards of development based on neoliberal economic theory. While leaders like Boff and Gutiérrez are meeting with academics and politicians to discuss sustainable development, on a grassroots level CEBs are joining non-profit organizations and NGOs to work and advocate for sustainable development in their respective countries.¹⁷⁶ In 1996, the Latin American Center for Competitiveness and Sustainable Development (CLACDS) was founded by INCAE Business School to continue this project of working for sustainable development in Latin America.¹⁷⁷

Along with a focus on sustainable development, liberation theologians in the 2000s have taken up the cause of environmental preservation. Liberation theology and

¹⁷³ Amy K. Glasmeier and Tracey L. Farrigan, “Poverty, Sustainability, and the Culture of Despair: Can Sustainable Development Strategies Support Poverty Alleviation in America’s Most Environmentally Challenged Communities?” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Vol. 590 2003: 131-149), 132-133.

¹⁷⁴ Martin, 82-85.

¹⁷⁵ Martin, 82-85.

¹⁷⁶ Martin, 82-85.

“Mensaje del CLADS,” *INCAE Business School* (1 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.incae.ac.cr/ES/clacds/ques/>>).

environmental advocacy have always had at least a distant connection. As a worldly theology focused on serving the oppressed and bringing about the Kingdom of God on earth, liberation theology has always emphasized the importance of making things right on this earth and taking care of “the least of these,” which could arguably be interpreted as our persecuted and ailing planet. In fact, in his 1986 *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, a classic text opposing liberation theology, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger included what appears to be a bit of an aside:

As a consequence of his bodily dimension, man needs the resources of the material world for his personal and social fulfillment. In this vocation to exercise dominion over the earth by putting it at his service through work, one can see an aspect of the image of God.¹⁷⁸

While he does not directly link liberation theology to environmental preservation, Ratzinger’s belief in the natural domination of humanity over nature is uncannily similar to his support of the elite Church in Rome over the popular Church of the Latin American poor.

However, it was not until the twenty-first century that environmental preservation became a dominant theme in liberation theology. Leonardo Boff has recently worked and advocated with Operation Noah, a Christian campaign centered in Great Britain dedicated exclusively to addressing and combating climate change.¹⁷⁹ Many liberation theologians also made appearances at the World Social Forum, held in Belem, Brazil, in January

¹⁷⁸ Ratzinger 1986, 20.

¹⁷⁹ “Brazilian Theologian Adds his Liberation Theology to the Climate Change Debate,” (26 Jan. 2009 <www.operationnoah.org>).

2009 to discuss issues of social justice; central among them were environmental preservation issues. Leonardo Boff spoke at the Forum about theology and the environment, particularly the incredible environmental challenges facing the Amazon region. Two weeks before the World Social Forum, the World Forum on Theology and Liberation also met in Belem, during which experts and theologians addressed eco-disasters and human responses, environmental issues related to bodily waste disposal, and theologies and movements for the promotion of indigenous peoples.¹⁸⁰

It is clear that in our current world, theologies of the poor and theologies of the environment are inextricably linked. One could point, as I did before, to the connection between a worldly theology and the call to maintain a healthier world or the conception of our abused creation as “the least of these.” One could also, perhaps more cynically, comment that, upon seeing the failure of Marxism to run its dialectical course in history, liberation theologians decided to commit their efforts to something more widely supported with a greater chance of success. However, I believe that Boff and his fellow theologians have moved so strongly toward environmentalism because they understand the intimate connection between the poor and the environment and know that, if and when the environment is to fail, it will be the beloved poor of Christ, those who sadly had the least to do with environmental degradation, who will suffer the most.

Leftward Political Shift in Latin America

From the late 1990s into the 2000s, the world has witnessed a significant shift to the left in the political scene of Latin America. This leftward movement shows no signs of slowing and may in fact be the start of a new political and economic era in Latin

¹⁸⁰ Hunt 2009.

America. Its effects have even begun to extend beyond Latin America, particularly with the election of former Nicaraguan priest, Sandinista, and liberation theologian Miguel de Escoto as President of the United Nations General Assembly for 2008.¹⁸¹ Before examining theories as to why this has taken place or what it has to do with liberation theology, I will give several examples of the way this shift has manifested itself in the last ten to fifteen years.

From about 1980 to 2000, Latin America developed, much to the U.S.'s delight, in an economically neoliberal manner, focusing on free trade and an open market. In this style of development, known as the Washington Consensus, Latin American governments worked closely with the IMF and aid from the United States, who promised that this strategy would be the quickest and most effective way to bring about a decline in Latin American poverty. However, the policies of the Washington Consensus failed, and by the year 2000, poverty and economic turmoil had risen significantly.¹⁸² One of the first countries to abandon neoliberalism and seek answers in socialist and populist theories of government was Venezuela. In 1992, Hugo Chávez, Venezuela's current president, led a military coup against the neoliberal democracy in power, and in 1998, he was democratically elected president, defeating both of the traditional political parties' candidates in what had been for quite some time a two-party system. A strict opponent of neoliberalism, Chávez began his term by denouncing capitalist policies and praising the achievements of Fidel Castro in Cuba. Chávez was and is deeply committed to changing the system, and by the time of his reelection in 2000, he had proposed a revised

¹⁸¹ Boff, "*Se proponga*," 2009.

¹⁸² Juan Forero, "Latin America Looks Leftward Again," *New York Times* (18 Dec. 2005: C4).

constitution for the country.¹⁸³ President Chávez has nationalized many industries in Venezuela, including the Bank of Venezuela in July 2008. By August of 2008, two million of the six-and-one-half million Venezuelans with formal jobs were employed by the state.¹⁸⁴ Not surprisingly, Chávez's reign in Venezuela has not been met with universal support; in fact, in both 2002 and 2004, serious attempts were made to have him removed from office. However, as of April 2009, he remains in power.¹⁸⁵

While Hugo Chávez is certainly the most extreme example of the recent leftist trend in Latin America, many other countries followed soon after in Venezuela's footsteps. In Chile, military dictator Augusto Pinochet lost his power to a democratic regime in 1990; only ten years later, in 2000, socialist candidate Ricardo Lagos won the presidency, followed by the current president, Michelle Bachelet Geria, another socialist elected in 2006.¹⁸⁶ In 2002 in Brazil, former metal worker and union leader Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was elected president as the candidate for the Workers' Party Movement, which in the past and present has found much support in liberation theologians and CEBs.¹⁸⁷ After an economic meltdown in Argentina from 2001 to 2002, leftist Peronist Néstor Kirchner was elected president. A longtime opponent of the IMF, Kirchner was able to stabilize the country economically by 2005 through policies contrary to the IMF's capitalist advice.¹⁸⁸

Dr. Tabaré Vázquez, the current president of Uruguay since 2005, ran as a member of a leftist coalition called the Progressive Encounter Broad Front New

¹⁸³ Vanden and Prevost, 70-71.

¹⁸⁴ "The Autocrat of Caracas," *The Economist* (9 Aug. 2008: 36), 36.

¹⁸⁵ Vanden and Prevost, 70-71.

¹⁸⁶ Vanden Prevost, 60.

¹⁸⁷ Rowe 2007.

¹⁸⁸ Vanden and Prevost, 57.

Majority.¹⁸⁹ His party has roots in the Tupamaro guerilla group, and Vázquez has rejected neoliberalism and American free-market policies in favor of a more just popular control.¹⁹⁰ In 2005, Evo Morales, an Aymara Indian, was elected president of Bolivia as a member of a leftist party called the Movement toward Socialism. An admirer of the work of Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez, Morales' presidency is led by his desire to nationalize the oil industry, fairly redistribute land, and decriminalize coca plantations. Morales remains president of Bolivia and continues to work to enact his reforms.¹⁹¹ From April 9-13, 2009, Morales enacted a hunger strike with indigenous and labor leaders to persuade opposition lawmakers to pass an election law that would assign more seats to poor, rural areas. While it is true that the law, which was successfully passed, will help him to get reelected, he claimed to be enacting this strike for the sake of the representation of the Bolivian poor in its government.¹⁹²

Particularly important for liberation theology is the election of Fernando Lugo as the president of Paraguay. Lugo was elected in April 2008 and took office in August 2008, after Paraguay had endured sixty-one years of dictatorship under the Colorado Party, beginning with General Alfredo Stroessner. While certainly a prominent leftist leader in Latin America, Lugo fits an entirely different profile than the others I have mentioned. He was formerly a Catholic bishop involved in liberation theology who resigned from the clergy in order to serve as president.¹⁹³ Always a proponent of the poor and land reform, Lugo served as a missionary for liberation theology and as the

¹⁸⁹ Larry Rohter, "Aided by Uruguay's Problems, Left is Expected to Gain Power," *New York Times* (31 Oct. 2004: N18).

¹⁹⁰ Vanden and Prevost, 56.

¹⁹¹ Alvaro Llosa, "No Left Turn," *New York Times* (27 Dec. 2005: A23).

¹⁹² "Bolivia: President Vows to Fast Until Election Law Passes," *New York Times* (11 Apr. 2009) A6. Gloria Carrasco, "Bolivia Congress Sets Date for General Elections," *CNN* (14 Apr. 2009 <<http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/04/14/bolivia.president/index.html?iref=newssearch>>).

¹⁹³ "The Bishop of Democracy," *The Economist* (9 Aug. 2008: 10), 10.

Bishop of San Pedro, one of the poorest areas in Paraguay. Familiarly called the “bishop of the poor,” Lugo is known for having backed invasions of large rural estates by radicals working for land reform.¹⁹⁴ His direct connection to liberation theology demonstrates its continuing presence in the nurturing of Latin America and the shaping of its political scene.

Why such a sudden shift to the left? As mentioned above, by the 2000s, the Latin American poor and many influential leaders had become disillusioned with the Washington Consensus and the capitalist growth they had been pursuing with the encouragement of the United States and much of Europe. They found that no matter how economically successful their countries may be, they could never rise to a point where they could compete with economic superpowers such as the United States.¹⁹⁵ Meanwhile, the growth and development advocated by the political right was only making conditions worse for the poor masses. Poverty and income inequalities were increasing, and in the late 1990s, even the elites of many Latin American countries suffered intermittent economic difficulties.¹⁹⁶ Another reason for the rise of the political left has to do with the declining influence of Cuba as the sole Southern role model for socialism and the emergence of diverse grassroots movements based on peaceful means instead of guerilla warfare.¹⁹⁷

Though only a few of these cases, such as Bishop Fernando Lugo in Paraguay’s connections with the progressive Church and the relationship between the Workers’ Party Movement and CEBs in Brazil, show a direct connection to liberation theology, its role as

¹⁹⁴ “Leftist Block,” 35.

¹⁹⁵ Vanden and Prevost, 70.

¹⁹⁶ “Bishop,” 10.

¹⁹⁷ Rowe 2007.

a factor in this shift is evident. Liberation theology liberated the Catholic Church from its support of the status quo, the oppressor, and the political right. In doing so, liberation theology undermined the political right's power and opened people's minds to think of the Church and its mission in new ways. Many of those involved in the socialist grassroots organizations currently changing the face of Latin American politics were educated, conscientized, and empowered by liberation theology's CEBs and popular church movements. Liberation theology is certainly not the only factor involved in this movement to the left, but the work of liberation theologians is an important component of Latin America's new attitude toward social and political life.

Recent Developments in Liberation Theology within the Catholic Church

We will now turn from the larger situation and effect of liberation theology on Latin America as a whole to its recent developments within the Catholic Church. We will consider liberation theology's present condition in light of the 2005 papal election, the Vatican's recent criticisms of neoliberalism, and the 2007 controversy over a *Notification* Father Jon Sobrino of El Salvador received from the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith regarding his Christological teachings.

First of all, liberation theology put Latin America and other third world areas like Africa "on the map" for the Catholic Church. By 2005, when Pope John Paul II died and the papal selection process began, Latin America had the highest concentration of Roman Catholics in the world. While Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger had been John Paul II's second-in-command for quite some time and seemed to many to be the obvious candidate for the papacy, there was much talk and press attention around the time of the papal selection of

the possibility of a Third-World pope.¹⁹⁸ A progressive move that would have been unheard of in the previous pope selection in 1978, liberation theology at least moderately successfully opened the eyes of the Catholic Church to its many members who live outside of Western culture.

Liberation theology's presence and impact within the Church is also evidenced by Vatican criticism of neoliberalism in the past few decades. While Pope John Paul II was known to many liberation theologians for his deep opposition to Marxism, it bears mentioning that, especially in his later years, he criticized neoliberal capitalism with nearly the same fervor. In his 1999 visit to Mexico, John Paul II made no efforts to hide his pleasure at the failure of communism, but also turned his attention to the evils of free-market capitalism and the oppressive situations it creates for the poor. He even hinted at the possibility of a kind of income redistribution that sounded like what proponents of liberation theology had been teaching all along.¹⁹⁹ In 1998, John Paul II voiced his support of the movement to cancel the foreign debts of third world countries so that they might have a chance to create their own truly independent economies. In that same year, John Paul II visited Cuba for the first time since the Revolution in 1959, and yet his message there was about the dangerous cyclical nature of neoliberal capitalism, which causes the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer. In his words:

In many countries of America, a system known as "neoliberalism" prevails; based on a purely economic concept of the human person, this system considers profit and the law of the market as its only parameters, to

¹⁹⁸ Polgreen and Rohter 2005.

¹⁹⁹ Alessandra Stanley, "Pope is Returning to Mexico with New Target: Capitalism," *New York Times* (22 Jan. 1999: A1).

the detriment of the dignity of and the respect due to individuals and peoples.²⁰⁰

Pope Benedict XVI has also expressed concern for the injustices of neoliberalism, though not nearly as vehemently as John Paul II. In his opening comments at the fifth CELAM Conference in Aparecida, Brazil in 2007, Benedict XVI paid verbal homage to the dangers of neoliberalism and the necessity of a preferential option for the poor. However, Benedict XVI's concern with neoliberalism is based not so much on the devastating social and economic effects for those at the bottom of the system as on the spiritual secularization that often comes with modern neoliberal theories of economics and of life.²⁰¹

Lastly and most importantly, liberation theology's theological presence within the Church was reemphasized and revitalized in 2007 by the controversy surrounding the writings of the Jesuit priest Jon Sobrino from El Salvador. Originally from Spain, Sobrino came to El Salvador in 1958 to serve as a priest in the community and a professor at the University of Central America.²⁰² An early proponent of liberation theology and a theological advisor to Archbishop Oscar Romero until his death in 1980,²⁰³ Sobrino narrowly escaped assassination in 1988 with six of his fellow Jesuit professors, including the renowned Ignacio Ellacuría. Fortunately for Sobrino, he was out of the country when the assassins came to his house, but his housekeeper and her

²⁰⁰ Rowe 2007.

²⁰¹ Rowe 2007.

²⁰² "Liberation Theology Leader to be Disciplined?" *EWTN News: Global Catholic Network* (9 Mar. 2007 <<http://www.ewtn.com/vnews/getstory.asp?number=76607>>).

²⁰³ John L. Allen, Jr., "Vatican Censures Sobrino, Who Calls Procedures 'Not Honest,'" *National Catholic Reporter* (National Catholic Reporter Publishing Company., Kansas City, MO. 16 Mar. 2007 <<http://ncronline.org>>).

daughter were killed in the process.²⁰⁴ By the time of his censure in 2007, Sobrino had also founded the Dom Oscar Romero Pastoral Center and served as the director of two periodicals: the *Latin American Magazine of Theology* and *Letters to the Churches*.²⁰⁵

In a manner chillingly similar to the silencing of Leonardo Boff in 1984-1985, Cardinal William Levada of the United States, Ratzinger's successor as the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), began an investigation in 2001 of two of Sobrino's books: *Jesus the Liberator* (1991) and *Christ the Liberator* (1999).²⁰⁶

Cardinal Levada proceeded to write a censuring *Notification* concerning Sobrino's theology that was approved by Benedict XVI in October 2006, signed and put into effect in November 2006, and proclaimed and released to the public in March 2007.²⁰⁷

According to the CDF Notification, Sobrino's two greatest points of error were his focus on the "Church of the Poor" instead of the apostolic tradition of the Church and, more gravely, his lack of emphasis on the divinity and salvific death of Jesus, preferring to speak of his earthly life and teachings.²⁰⁸ Though John L. Allen, Jr. of the *National Catholic Reporter* proposes that this second criticism has more to do with disagreement concerning Christology than refuting liberation theology,²⁰⁹ Benedict XVI argued that such a "confused Christology" will inevitably lead to liberation theology, for Jesus' purpose as the divine, saving Son of God is replaced with a purely sociological concept

²⁰⁴ Michael O'Sullivan "Reflections on the Sobrino Notification," *AMDG Newsletter* (Jesuit Communication Center., Dublin. 28 Mar. 2007 <http://newsweaver.ie/ejesuits/e_article000782708.crm?x=b7HPPd2,b3FrLlmJ,w>).

²⁰⁵ Vera Ivanise Bombonato, "The Commitment to Taking the Poor Down from the Cross," *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross: Christology of Liberation* (Ed. José María Vigil. Online Book: International Theological Commission of EATWOT, 2007), 37.

²⁰⁶ Allen, "Censures," 2007.

²⁰⁷ Sandro Magister, "The Sentence Against Theologian Jon Sobrino is Aimed at an Entire Continent," *Chiesa* (20 Mar. 2007 <<http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/127821?eng=y>>).

²⁰⁸ Allen, "Censures," 2007.

²⁰⁹ John L. Allen Jr., "Sobrino's Notification: A Sign of Things to Come," *National Catholic Reporter* (National Catholic Reporter Publishing Company., Kansas City, MO. 16 Mar. 2007 <<http://ncronline.org>>).

of Jesus as a physical liberator of the oppressed.²¹⁰ One may also remember that the CDF's criticisms of Leonardo Boff had more to do with his opinions concerning the hierarchy of the Church than his liberation theology, but few would deny that what was really under fire in 1984, and again in 2007, was this very theology of liberation.

While the community of liberation theologians reacted with a mixture of support and outrage (see below), Father Jon Sobrino responded to the *Notification* with a calm defiance. In December of 2006, once the *Notification* had been signed by Benedict XVI but before it had been made public, Jon Sobrino wrote a letter to Friar Peter Hans Kolvenbach, the Superior General of the Jesuits, explaining his refusal to sign and accept the Vatican *Notification*. Sobrino claimed that this *Notification* was an example of not only the Vatican's repression and censure of him but also its crusade against liberation theology as a whole. Citing many other well-respected priests and theologians who found no theological error in his work, Sobrino asserted that this *Notification* was the Vatican taking advantage of an opportunity to try to stop his writings and actions in the continuing field of liberation theology.²¹¹ In a later essay regarding the *Notification*, Sobrino claimed that he always welcomed correction if any part of his theology was found to be intrinsically wrong or harmful in some way. However, he firmly asserted that if what the Vatican was criticizing was his Christology that removes Jesus from the power, wealth, and worldly honors that the Church so often wishes to ascribe to him, then this theology was not a danger or heresy, but rather an instance of "exposing the human sinfulness [of the Church] that also threatens theology."²¹²

²¹⁰ Allen, "Things to Come," 2007.

²¹¹ Allen, "Censures," 2007.

²¹² Jon Sobrino, "Epilogue," *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross: Christology of Liberation*. (Ed. José María Vigil. Online Book: International Theological Commission of EATWOT, 2007), 310-312.

The fact that Jon Sobrino's works received enough attention to worry the Vatican and that this event was so highly publicized and covered by the media shows us that liberation theology is in fact still alive and continuing to do its work. As we shall see below, the censure of Jon Sobrino not only brought liberation theology back into the media, but also sparked a movement among modern-day liberation theologians to publicize their work, both writing and action, so that the world may know that liberation theology is not dead.

Writing, Actions, and Theological Claims of Modern-Day Liberation Theologians

The *Notification* of Jon Sobrino spurred liberation theologians to action in several ways, but here I would like to explore an important contribution made by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). EATWOT, founded in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania in 1976, is an organization of Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christian theologians committed to establishing non-Western theologies for Third-World Christians and working for healthy religious pluralism, social justice, and peace.²¹³ After Sobrino's *Notification* was made public, EATWOT's International Theological Commission, led by José María Vigil, reached out to other Third-World and liberation theologians, asking for their reactions to the *Notification* and their meditations on other aspects of liberation theology. These responses were compiled into a three-hundred-page free digital book called *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross: Christology of Liberation* (2007). This book is a collection of essays from forty-two different scholars and liberation theologians from Africa, Latin America, Sri Lanka, North America, and

²¹³“Who We Are,” EATWOT (*Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians*) (20 Feb. 2009 <http://www.eatwot.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12&Itemid=26>).

Europe providing a diverse view of the different ideas circulating in modern-day liberation theology. It has been made free to the public so that people of all social classes may access it and learn about liberation theology's continued presence and influence.²¹⁴

One of the several places where this digital book is available for download is a website entitled "Liberation Theology Resources" or "LiberationTheology.org." This website is maintained and edited by Dennis Rivers, an author, educator, and theologian from Oregon who is committed to creating and distributing free digital books so that information is available not only to those who can afford to buy books but also to anyone that can access the internet. Rivers has founded and maintained this particular website on liberation theology in order to educate people in the contemporary thought and development of a theology that many have written off as a failure.²¹⁵ Along with digital books, LiberationTheology.org includes links to contemporary essays, articles, and organizations related to liberation theology, such as the Ignacio Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights, the SHARE Foundation in El Salvador, the Christian magazine *Sojourners*, and the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem.²¹⁶ Like any foundation or corporation in the modern world, liberation theology has fully employed the internet to further its work.

As I close this chapter, I would like to briefly highlight some of the teachings of modern-day liberation theologians articulated in *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross*.

As I mentioned in the section on sustainable development, little has changed in the discourse of liberation theology from the late 1980s to the present except for the

²¹⁴ José María Vigil, "Introduction," *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross: Christology of Liberation* (Ed. José María Vigil. Online Book: International Theological Commission of EATWOT, 2007), 13-15.

²¹⁵ Sobrino, 306.

²¹⁶ Dennis Rivers, Ed., *Liberation Theology Resources (LiberationTheology.org)* (3 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.liberationtheology.org>>).

development of a more positive attitude toward participatory democracy, a greater concern for environmental issues, and more specific regional changes to adapt liberation theology to its twenty-first-century context. That basic message of liberation and preferential advocacy for the poor and oppressed “least of these” has remained and will remain the same, regardless of changing circumstances. *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross* is primarily about Christology, a narrower aspect of theology dealing with the significance of Jesus, but mention is made of Old Testament sources for liberation theology, as well, particularly the liberating example of the exodus and the concept of the Year of Jubilee, a part of Jewish law where land is redistributed every fifty years (see below).²¹⁷ The love of God, the necessity for justice, and the centrality of the poor in the Kingdom of God are affirmed time and time again by the liberation theologians of our time. In the words of Argentine theologian Oscar Campana, liberation theologians still seek to remind us that:

At the dawn of revelation, one of the first questions God asked human beings – in the person of Cain – was “Where is your brother Abel?” (Gen 4:9). In [Matt 25:31-46, Jesus’ story of the Last Judgment], which places us at the final moment of history, we are told that God has not changed his question. And who knows, perhaps all of the revelation that happens between the one and the other has been nothing more than the divine effort

²¹⁷ Oscar Campana, “Jesus, the Poor, and Theology,” *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross: Christology of Liberation* (Ed. José María Vigil. Online Book: International Theological Commission of EATWOT, 2007), 55.

to make us understand that there is no other question that merits an answer.²¹⁸

²¹⁸ Campana, 60.

Chapter IV: Liberation Theology's Significance within Christianity as a Whole

Having traced the history of the rise and decline of liberation theology in the twentieth century and examined its present state in the twenty-first, let us turn finally to an analysis of liberation theology's relationship to and significance within Christianity as a whole. While liberation theology is certainly a modern movement that emerged very late in the history of Christianity (only in the last half-century), I argue that its central ideals can be found in the early stages of the Judeo-Christian movement and have continued to resurface throughout the history of Christianity. In order to demonstrate this, I will examine the relationship between liberation theology and the Bible, traditional Catholic social teaching, and other movements in Christianity. In doing so, I intend to refute the claim of Carol Ann Drogus, who argued in 1995 that liberation theology has never been anything more than a small, vocal faction within the Catholic Church that was disproportionately represented at the CELAM Conference in Medellín and has since then been subjugating itself to Vatican power.²¹⁹ As I have argued and ultimately intend to prove, liberation theology is a dynamic movement still alive today that has irreversibly changed the shape of the Christian tradition.

Liberation Theology and the Bible

Let us first consider liberation theology's relationship to Biblical teaching. Like nearly any Christian theology, liberation theology looks to the Bible, the Holy Scriptures of the Christian tradition, as one of its main sources of inspiration and justification.

²¹⁹ Drogus, 465-468.

Beginning with founders like Gustavo Gutiérrez and Leonardo Boff, liberation theology has placed particular emphasis on certain parts of the Bible, most notably the Book of Exodus, the Hebrew Prophets, the Gospels, the Book of Acts, and the Book of Revelation.²²⁰ Liberation theologians recognize in these books a Liberator God who actively takes the side of the poor and oppressed and calls his followers to work for social, political, and economic justice. As H. Mark Roelofs points out in his article “Liberation Theology: The Recovery of Biblical Radicalism” (1988), liberation theology’s very idea of a personal God who actively intervenes in history comes from the Hebrew Bible and early Christianity, untainted by the Platonic idealism that was adopted by Paul and has been applied to God in most Christian theology of the Common Era.²²¹ In this and other ways, Roelofs compares proponents of liberation theology to Biblical radicals throughout the centuries, from the first Christians in the Book of Acts to the Anabaptists of the Reformation to the Amish and Mennonites of the present day.²²² Given this continued presence of Biblical radicals throughout Christian history, it is not a far stretch to look for relationships between Biblical texts and the twenty- and twenty-first-century actions of liberation theologians. We will first look at commonalities between liberation theology and the Hebrew Bible or Christian Old Testament.

Exodus, the second book in the Bible, tells the story of Israel’s God Yahweh actively intervening in history to free the nation from oppressive slavery under the Egyptians. Moses, God’s agent and the hero of the story, has become important in both the Jewish and Christian traditions as a bearer of God’s word and God’s law to the people of Israel. To liberation theologians, however, Moses is much more than that – he is the

²²⁰ Boffs, *Introduction*, 32-35.

²²¹ Roelofs, 550-551.

²²² Roelofs, 551.

first liberator of an oppressed people who leads them out of slavery,²²³ through the wilderness, and eventually to the Promised Land that God has set aside for this poor and oppressed nation that he calls his own.

In the laws that Moses gives the people of Israel after their exodus from Egypt, liberation theologians find Yahweh exercising a preferential option for the poor and needy. In Leviticus 19, God commands his people:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.²²⁴

However, this call to care for the poor and hungry is weakened by another law just a few verses later cautioning judges against showing partiality to the poor or to the rich when making a decision.²²⁵

Modern-day Argentine liberation theologian Oscar Campana points to a stronger example of liberation theology's ideals in Old Testament Law: the Year of Jubilee. According to this commandment, every forty-nine years Israel is to celebrate a jubilee in which all property is returned to its original owner and every slave is set free.²²⁶ Such a redistribution of land and pardoning of debts sounds uncannily like the call for agrarian reform and human equality issued by liberation theologians. Though it is unlikely that

²²³ Roelofs, 553.

²²⁴ Leviticus 19:9-10 (all Bible citations are taken from the NRSV).

²²⁵ Leviticus 19:15.

²²⁶ Leviticus 25:8-54.

the jubilee was ever actually observed in Israelite history, it sets an ideal, as described by Campana, “that each generation of Israelites needed to pass through the experience of receiving the land as a gift from God.”²²⁷

The last major Old Testament source for liberation theologians is the books ascribed to the Hebrew Prophets who foretold the impending doom of both the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah because of their failure to follow God’s commandments. These prophets, such as Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, issued a nation-wide call for justice for the widows and orphans and a restructuring of the sinful and oppressive social systems that the powerful had put in place to advance their own desires. A poignant call from the Prophet Isaiah reads:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?...Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.²²⁸

Many considered and still consider the outspoken liberation theologians to be the prophets of modern time, proclaiming the word of a just God to a multitude of unjust nations.

As I mentioned above, there is also much continuity between liberation theology and the life and teachings of Jesus. In Luke’s Gospel, when Mary learns that she will

²²⁷ Campana, 55.

²²⁸ Isaiah 1:11, 15-17.

give birth to Jesus, she responds with a song of praise that has come to be known as the Magnificat, an important canticle in the Roman Catholic tradition. In the Magnificat, Mary rejoices that God has chosen to dethrone the powerful and exalt the humble, to “[fill] the hungry with good things and [send] the rich away empty.”²²⁹ Continuing in Luke’s Gospel, the good news of Jesus’ birth is first announced to the shepherds, the poor and excluded of first-century Jewish society.²³⁰ As an adult, Jesus continued in the same manner, eating with and ministering to the poor and outcasts in his society.

The teachings that the Gospel writers ascribe to Jesus continue to embody the spirit of liberation theology. In fact, a great deal of what Jesus taught was the politicization of the Jewish tradition that had been reduced and ritualized by the religious leaders of the time,²³¹ much in the same way that liberation theologians seek to re-politicize the Roman Catholic tradition that over time has also been diminished through ritualization and spiritualization. This is especially evident in Luke’s version of the Beatitudes, in which Jesus proclaims, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God...but woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.”²³² This teaching, more familiar to most Christians as “Blessed are the poor *in spirit*”²³³ (italics mine) from Matthew’s Gospel, has so often been romanticized by the Church that we miss the scandal and ultimate reversal of values that it announces. As Oscar Campana comments:

²²⁹ Luke 1:53.

²³⁰ Luke 2:8-20.

Victor Codina, “The Poor, the Church, and Theology,” *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross: Christology of Liberation* (Ed. José María Vigil. Online Book: International Theological Commission of EATWOT, 2007), 65.

²³¹ Roeloffs, 556.

²³² Luke 6:20, 24.

²³³ Matthew 5:3.

What [the Beatitudes] communicate is that the poor's lot...is a consequence of socio-historical causes that are reversible because they depend on acts of other human beings. Thus, God refuses to be the guarantor of the established order.²³⁴

The teachings of Jesus that demonstrate the message of liberation theology are pervasive throughout the Gospels, so for brevity's sake, I will highlight just two more. First is the story of Jesus preaching in his hometown, Nazareth. In Luke's Gospel, this is the first recorded story of his ministry, giving extra emphasis to the message Jesus proclaims when he stands up to read from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.²³⁵

Campana argues that Jesus' mention of "the year of the Lord's favor" could be a reference to the Old Testament Year of Jubilee;²³⁶ regardless, the proclamation is arguably the clearest presentation of the ideals of liberation theology in the Bible. Second, let us consider Matthew's story of the Last Judgment²³⁷ (mentioned above), in which all people are judged ultimately on what they did to help those in need. As Jesus

²³⁴ Campana, 56.

²³⁵ Luke 4:18-19; Isaiah 61:1-2.

²³⁶ Campana, 55.

²³⁷ Matthew 25:31-46.

says, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me.”²³⁸

This story is a strong affirmation of a major teaching of liberation theology: what happens to the poor happens to God.²³⁹

Lastly I would like to examine the New Testament after Jesus, specifically the experience of the early Christian Church. Two passages in particular are cited by liberation theologians in support of their theologies and political philosophies, both from the Book of Acts. As they recount the same experience, I will quote only one:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common...There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.²⁴⁰

If this is in fact how the early Church operated before it was adopted by the Roman Empire in the fourth century, it is one of the first recorded instances of socialism.

However, regardless of its historical factuality, this story not only shows that socialism can be compatible with Christianity but equates socialism with the Christian lifestyle in the years immediately following the death of Jesus. This early Christian socialism has obvious connections to the socialist political philosophies promoted by liberation

²³⁸ Matthew 25:40.

²³⁹ Campana, 59-60.

²⁴⁰ Acts 4:32, 34-35; See also Acts 2:43-47

theology's leaders and serves also as the example upon which liberation theologians and other laypeople in Latin America built CEBs.²⁴¹

To conclude our analysis, liberation theology is supported by much Biblical teaching, and, I argue, is in line with the ultimate spirit of love and justice which the Bible, despite difficulties of contexts and changing moralities, ultimately seeks to promote. This can be seen in Old Testament sources such as Exodus and the Prophets and in the New Testament in the life and teachings of Jesus and the structure and experience of the early Church as described in Acts. The only main tension between liberation theology and Biblical radicalism is the pacifism promoted in Biblical teachings. Biblical radicalists see Jesus' teachings about turning the other cheek and his choice to passively go through with the crucifixion as the ultimate examples of pacifism, which should serve as models for modern-day Christians.²⁴² In contrast, liberation theology adheres to a more flexible interpretation of Jesus' teachings on pacifism. Liberation theologians agree that in ideal situations pacifism is the most Christ-like course of action, but for some, in situations of hunger, strife, and oppression, guerilla revolution for the sake of the poor is the best way they know to live out the Gospel.

Liberation Theology and Catholic Social Teaching

Having investigated liberation theology's relationship to the Bible, the foundational Scriptures of the Christian tradition, let us look now at the Roman Catholic tradition out of which liberation theology grew and its official social teaching.

²⁴¹ Rowe 2007.

²⁴² Roelofs, 555.

Though Catholic theology has always included social and ethical elements, the first official papal encyclical concerning social teaching was not written until the late nineteenth century. In light of the industrial revolution and its devastating consequences for factory workers, many of whom were Catholics, Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) wrote the 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* to articulate the Church's official position on the situation.²⁴³ The Catholic Church blamed the plight of the industrial workers and the vast inequalities of society on the individualism and selfishness of liberal capitalism, the dominant political philosophy of the time. Leo XIII traced the problems of capitalism back to the Enlightenment, when the power and influence of the Church decreased and individualism emerged as the dominant philosophy. In an effort to escape this modern, self-centered mindset, Leo XIII and other Catholics looked back in nostalgia to the agrarian, group-focused society of the Middle Ages as the ideal to which the Catholic Church and all society should aspire.²⁴⁴ It was Leo XIII who established Thomas Aquinas' scholasticism as the official theology and philosophy of the Catholic Church, attempting to bring all Catholic theology and philosophy back to this Middle-Age ideal.²⁴⁵ While such a move can be seen to exhibit a rejection of modernity and refusal to adapt to changing circumstances, it did give the Church a unique perspective from which to comment on modern society.

As we examine the social observations and teachings of the Catholic Church from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their relationship to liberation theology, it is important to understand the anthropology of Catholic social teaching. The Catholic

²⁴³ Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching 1891-Present: A Historical, Theological, and Ethical Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 5.

²⁴⁴ Curran, 5.

²⁴⁵ Curran, 9.

Church understands the human being on two basic levels, neither of which can be violated or separated from the other. First is the dignity and inherent sacredness of every individual, who deserves to be recognized for him or herself. Second is the social nature of the human being. The Christian life cannot be lived in isolation, and in most situations, the needs of the group take priority over the desires of a particular individual.²⁴⁶ It is from this social understanding of humanity that the idea of the “commonweal,” more often called the common good, arose (see below). As we shall see, much of Catholic social teaching is committed to seeking a reconciliation, or middle way, between these two understandings of the human being.

First let us consider Catholic social teachings that are directly related to liberation theology: those teachings concerning a “preferential option for the poor,” capitalism and socialism, and human rights. It has been said by many that Catholic social teaching essentially “learned” its preferential option for the poor from liberation theology, and while it is true that the phrase itself did not appear in papal encyclicals until after the bishops of CELAM had popularized it,²⁴⁷ I argue that the idea itself has deep and consistent roots throughout Catholic teaching, which I will address in the section below concerning the idea of the common good. The explicit mention of this preferential option, however, did not occur until John Paul II’s 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, in which it is domesticated and spiritualized in such a way that many liberation theologians would hardly recognize it.²⁴⁸ Still, the presence of this preferential option in official papal encyclicals shows that it was consonant with previous teachings regarding

²⁴⁶ Curran, 131.

²⁴⁷ Curran, 185-186.

²⁴⁸ Curran, 13.

the poor and, more importantly, was a significant call and movement within the Catholic Church that the Vatican could not ignore.

Catholic social teaching also devotes much attention to the ethics of different government systems, particularly capitalism and socialism, another subject about which liberation theology has much to say. Originally, in *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo anno*, Pope Pius XI's (1922-1939) 1931 encyclical to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, the Vatican declared that socialism was intrinsically evil because it countered Church teachings on private property and class relations. Pius XI went on to condemn Marxism for its atheism and hostility toward the Church. However, Leo XIII and Pius XI had also witnessed the evils of capitalism, and while they did not officially condemn capitalism as they had socialism, they spent much time warning against the evils of a free-market economy and the abuses to which it could lead.²⁴⁹ There was talk of the Vatican proposing its own "third way," particularly after Pius XI's *Quadragesimo anno* proposed its own corporatist government philosophy, but nothing significant ever materialized, as most people of the time considered political philosophy to be outside the realm of the Church.²⁵⁰

Pope John XXIII and his successor, Pope Paul VI, amended this outright condemnation of socialism. In *Pacem in terris*, written in 1963, John XXIII highlighted the importance of being able to separate Marxism as a holistic life philosophy from Marxism as a tool for economic analysis.²⁵¹ Paul VI took John XXIII's ideas one step further and began to permit the cautious use of Marxism for Christian sociological analysis. In contrast to Pius XI, Paul VI condemned unchecked capitalism and economic

²⁴⁹ Curran, 199-200.

²⁵⁰ Curran, 198.

²⁵¹ Curran, 200-201.

liberalism but issued no such condemnation regarding socialism.²⁵² While these documents and proclamations pale in comparison to liberation theology's enthusiastic embrace of socialism and violent rejection of capitalism, it is important to see the shared recognition between liberation theology and the Vatican that unchecked capitalism brought with it danger, inequalities, and ultimately immorality. It is also illuminating to see that the Vatican began to dialogue with socialist countries in the 1960s and 1970s, the same two decades when liberation theology was flourishing.

When John Paul II assumed the papacy, socialism was once again condemned by the Roman Curia. As I have discussed above, John Paul II's experience growing up in Communist Poland greatly affected his attitude toward socialism of any kind and, while he also criticized unchecked capitalism, solidified for him that capitalism would always be the better option. Though his encyclicals strongly criticize both political systems as materialistic and valuing products over people, history shows us that John Paul II was an instrumental part of the fall of the Soviet Union.²⁵³ In his post-Soviet 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II declared socialism to have failed as a political and economic system and advised people and countries to work instead for a just and controlled capitalist market economy. While he continued to admonish Christians to look after the poor, he, true to character, elevated their spiritual needs above their earthly needs, proclaiming it more important to feed the poor spiritually than physically.²⁵⁴ With John Paul II and Benedict XVI after him, capitalism won the day and to a certain extent the Church. However, it is important for us to note the similarities between Catholic

²⁵² Curran, 201-204.

²⁵³ Curran, 204-205.

²⁵⁴ Curran, 206-209.

social teaching of the 1960s and 1970s regarding Marxism and liberation theology's promotion of the use of Marxism for social and economic analysis.

Before exploring what I believe to be the strongest connection between liberation theology and Catholic social teaching, those teachings concerning the right to private property versus the common good, I would like to pause and highlight an interesting element of Catholic social teaching concerning human rights that corresponds to the ideals of liberation theology. The concept of human rights flourished in Western society with the Enlightenment, but the Catholic Church consistently rejected this concept of civil and political rights, claiming that they were too individually focused and did not keep at their center what was best for the group. However, in 1963, with John XXIII's *Pacem in terris*, the Catholic Church began to understand human rights as social and economic rights – as Charles E. Curran describes it, freedom *to* instead of freedom *from*. Instead of rights to freedom of speech, worship, assembly, and petition, human rights were (and continue to be) understood as more accurately represented by the right to life, food, clothing, medical care, and a fair daily wage.²⁵⁵ In contrast to the individualist political rights of the Enlightenment, this new conception of human rights strongly resonates with the teachings of liberation theology.

The last and, I argue, strongest connection between liberation theology and Catholic social teaching lies in teachings concerning the right to private property versus the common good. As I mentioned above, along with writing *Rerum Novarum*, the first official document of Catholic social teaching, Leo XIII also canonized the teachings of Thomas Aquinas as the official theology and philosophy of the Catholic Church. An interesting contradiction exists therein, for while *Rerum Novarum* strongly advocates the

²⁵⁵ Curran, 217-219.

right to private property and for the worker to use what he or she earns to his or her own discretion, Aquinas is known for his promotion of the common good.²⁵⁶ Aquinas taught that according to natural law, all people possess all things in common, and it is only because of human sinfulness that a perceived need for private property has entered into our existence. Drawing on the belief that humans are social by nature and neither can nor should exist solely for their individual benefit, Aquinas holds that “the universal destiny of the goods of creation is to serve the needs of all,”²⁵⁷ and therefore “a person in extreme necessity can legitimately take from another the material goods that he or she needs. This action is not theft because in necessity, all things are common.”²⁵⁸ This concept of the universal ownership of the goods of creation fits seamlessly into a socialist political philosophy and provides justification for the land and income redistribution for which liberation theologians call. In fact, in his 1977 article “Where Hunger Is, God is Not,” Gustavo Gutiérrez echoes Aquinas’ doctrine of the common good, saying, “If persons are in extreme need, they have the right to take from the abundance of others what they themselves need.”²⁵⁹ The connection and therefore ecclesiological justification could not be clearer.

Though many elements of Catholic social teaching have changed as different popes assumed the papacy, the Church’s teachings on private property and the common good have remained fairly stable. While John XXIII affirmed private property as a natural part of human life, he argued that the right of all people to use the earth’s goods for their survival would always come first. Paul VI furthered this teaching in *Populorum*

²⁵⁶ Curran, 174-177.

²⁵⁷ Curran, 177.

²⁵⁸ Curran, 176-177.

²⁵⁹ Martin, 75-81.

progressio, asserting that in no circumstance is private property ever an absolute or unconditional right; rather it is subject to the necessity of meeting the needs of all people.²⁶⁰ While many of the teachings of John Paul II are more conservative than those of his predecessors, his teachings on private property remain surprisingly similar. John Paul II echoes the sentiment of Aquinas that the goods of the world are meant to serve the needs of all and warns those who own property of any kind that they have a social responsibility to maintain justice towards their fellow human beings.²⁶¹

Starting in the 1960s and continuing into contemporary social teaching, this concept of the common good has been raised from an individual level to a larger-scale political level. Theorists are examining not only property owned by individuals but property owned by opposing social classes and different countries, maintaining that the goods of the world must be used to serve the needs of all.²⁶² This idea is particularly applied to developing countries, such as those of Latin America and the rest of the Global South, in relationship to wealthy Northern countries like the United States and the countries of Europe. The Church has issued a stronger call to work for the common good, not just the common good of a tribe or society but the universal common good of the world community.²⁶³ This at least partial recognition of the failure of development theories to serve the common good lends credibility to liberation theology's practice of placing the liberation of peoples above the development of nations.

Although liberation theology is not entirely consonant with these traditional teachings and certainly incorporates its own unique elements, its strong connections and

²⁶⁰ Curran, 179-180.

²⁶¹ Curran, 173-174.

²⁶² Curran, 181.

²⁶³ Curran, 157-158.

similarities to the Bible and Catholic social teaching establish liberation theology as a movement deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. It continues to offer fresh perspectives on the Church's relationship to the poor that have had a lasting impression on Christian theology and practice. However, before concluding with an analysis of the unique elements of liberation theology and why it is ultimately such a significant movement, I will examine other Christian movements that in one way or another show similarities to liberation theology.

Liberation Theology and Other Christian Movements

Various movements have emerged within Christianity that share liberation theology's focus on social justice, adherence to Biblical radicalism, or politicization of religious teachings. While space does not permit an in-depth exploration of each, I will briefly call attention to movements within both the Protestant and Catholic traditions where other scholars of liberation theology have seen important connections and will then give a more in-depth explanation of Latin American liberation theology's relationship to other "theologies of liberation" and the North American Protestant movement known as the Social Gospel.

Within Catholicism, connections have been made between liberation theology and both the Franciscan and Jesuit Orders. The Franciscans, founded in the twelfth century in Italy by Saint Francis of Assisi, focused on living a life of apostolic poverty in solidarity with the poor and working to preach and live out the Gospel of Jesus, in which the poor were a central focus.²⁶⁴ Liberation theology has also been compared to the Jesuit Order, founded in the sixteenth century by St. Ignatius Loyola of Spain, in the fact that it is a

²⁶⁴ Rowe 2007.

renewal movement within Christianity that has been censured and at times silenced by the Vatican yet refuses to let its message go unheard.²⁶⁵

Liberation theology has also been compared to many different types of Protestantism. John H. Yoder outlines a connection between liberation theology and the Puritans in the British Reformation of the seventeenth century. He cites Oliver Cromwell's attempt to secure justice for all by instituting a new political regime, claiming that the old system was corrupt beyond repair. Although Cromwell's efforts were a failure and arguably did more harm than good, this same mindset can be seen in liberation theology's critique of the corruption of capitalism and call for socialism in Latin America.²⁶⁶ Ironically enough, liberation theology has also been compared to the very Evangelical Protestantism that is diminishing its influence. Though their theologies are radically different, Carol Ann Drogus and Jason Rowe point out that both liberation theology and Evangelical Protestantism reject long-held traditions of institutional hierarchy in favor of more personal and relevant religious faith that addresses people in their current social situations.²⁶⁷ Mainline Protestantism also shares similarities to liberation theology. Theologians as early as Schliermacher (1768-1834) issued a call to traditionally individualistic Protestants to rediscover the social nature of religion and morality.²⁶⁸ Later, when liberation theology was emerging in the 1960s, many mainline Protestants in the Spanish-speaking world were developing similar ideas of equating

²⁶⁵ Rowe 2007.

²⁶⁶ Yoder, 291-292.

²⁶⁷ Drogus, 472-473.

Rowe 2007.

²⁶⁸ Martin, 70.

salvation with liberation of the oppressed like Presbyterian missionary Richard Shaull (see above).²⁶⁹

We now turn to other theologies of liberation centered in different areas of the world or addressing different situations of oppression. These movements are in a way the children of liberation theology, inspired by and emerging in response to the Latin American movement. In the 1980s, after liberation theology had taken root in Latin America and before the most serious cases of Vatican censure, liberation theology began to spread to the whole Third World, Asia and Africa in particular, as well as to other groups of oppressed people, such as women and African Americans in the United States.²⁷⁰ In her chapter in EATWOT's online book *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross*, Lee Cormie cites many examples of theologies that have grown out of liberation theology, among them black theology, feminist theology, gay theology, eco-theologies, and disabled theologies.²⁷¹ Lacking the space to develop all of them, I would like to speak briefly about liberation theology in other third world countries, feminist liberation theology, and homosexual liberation theology. However, particularly for feminist and homosexual theologies, I must extend a word of caution when comparing them to Latin American liberation theology. While they are all founded on the same call to the liberation and re-humanization of society's outcasts, feminist and homosexual liberation theologies will inevitably differ significantly from economic liberation theology and will look to a solution of reform instead of revolution.²⁷² The question then stands for us to

²⁶⁹ Yoder, 290.

²⁷⁰ Klaibur, 14.

²⁷¹ Lee Cormie, "Jesus of History, Christs of Faith, and Hope that Another World is Possible," *Getting the Poor Down from the Cross: Christology of Liberation* (Ed. José María Vigil. Online Book: International Theological Commission of EATWOT, 2007), 85-86.

²⁷² Boffs, *Introduction*, 28-30.

ponder: in reformulating several of the basic tenets of traditional liberation theology, are these theologies contributing to the opening of the Church's heart to the oppressed, or are they quelling the spirit and domesticating the language of liberation theology, much as the Vatican has done? This question will remain important as we look at the situations of those who are politically and socially oppressed but not economically oppressed.

Second to Latin America, liberation theology has experienced the most success in Africa, particularly South Africa during apartheid. Protestant missionaries were the first to evangelize Africa, but they taught, as it is described in Romans 13, complete and total submission to authority with the belief that whoever is in power is God's chosen leader. The Protestants' method of supporting the status quo won them favor with the government in power, but left them little relevance to the oppressed African citizens. As the Catholic Church became important in South Africa, initially it also stuck to the status quo and viewed anything that hinted at Marxism, like the South African Radical Revolution, as offensive and incompatible with the Christian tradition. In the 1970s, however, the Catholic Church adopted a more flexible and pragmatic standpoint and was able to join forces with the Radical Revolution to oppose apartheid.²⁷³ It is from this joining of the Church and the Revolution that historic figures such as the great Bishop Desmond Tutu arose.

Another theology of liberation related to Latin American liberation theology is the feminist theology of liberation, referred to simply as feminist theology. This theology got its start in nineteenth-century America with leaders like Sarah Grimké, Lucretia Mott, Maria Miller Steward, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Anna Julia

²⁷³ Adrian Hastings, "The Christian Churches and Liberation Movements in Southern Africa," *African Affairs* (Vol. 80.320 1981: 345-354), 345-354.

Cooper. Surprisingly enough, feminist theology was inspired and strongly influenced by American evangelical revivalism. Though theologically conservative, these mass revivals, like those of Charles Grandison Finney, were pervaded by a sense of egalitarianism, and the opportunity for women to participate fully in the revivals inspired them to look for other chances to assert themselves in the theology and life of the American Protestant Church. Elizabeth Cady Stanton in particular is known for her publication of *The Woman's Bible*, released in two volumes in 1895 and 1898, which analyzed the Bible's teachings concerning women and the ways these teachings had been used to both oppress and empower women throughout the ages. However, Stanton's eventual conclusion was that the Bible was in fact an andocentric document, biased in favor of men, and that feminists needed to look elsewhere for support of their movement.²⁷⁴

In the twentieth century, particularly the 1960s, feminist theology flourished and a variety of perspectives emerged on women in the Bible and women's role in Christianity. Theologians like Rosemary Radford Ruether taught about the way traditional theology has oppressed women and issued a call for non-gendered and even specifically female images of God.²⁷⁵ Radical feminists, like Mary Daly and Carol Christ, went beyond this to say that the patriarchal nature of Christianity ran too deep and that true feminists must move beyond Christianity to post-Christian traditions of Goddess worship geared specifically toward the needs of women.²⁷⁶ Much in the same manner as the liberation

²⁷⁴ "Feminist Theology," *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, (Ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 3 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmann Publishing Company, 2001), 305.

²⁷⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

²⁷⁶ Anne M. Clifford, "Feminist Spirituality," *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Ed. Philip Sheldrake. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 299.

theologians, many feminists reinterpreted concepts such as the Trinity, Christology, sin, atonement, and salvation in ways that were more meaningful and personally applicable to women. Others, like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, looked at Jesus' movement in the New Testament and pointed out that in his radical critique of society, Jesus also radically critiqued the patriarchal and oppressive structures of both the Roman and Jewish cultures of the time.²⁷⁷ In standing for the poor and oppressed of his society, Jesus stood for and continues to stand for the rights of women, who have so long suffered under the dominance of patriarchy.

Feminist theology continues to flourish today throughout many parts of the world in Catholic, Protestant, and post-Christian circles. It is characteristically ecumenical and open to collaboration with other causes focused on attaining social justice and overcoming oppression.²⁷⁸ Feminist theology often adds to its cause environmental advocacy, so much so that eco-feminism, a term coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, has developed into a significant branch within feminist theology. As feminist theology rejects traditional Christianity's affirmation that man is greater than woman, eco-feminism rejects the assertion that culture is greater than nature and that nature only exists to meet the needs of human beings. Eco-feminism calls for solidarity within all of God's creation and bases this call on Biblical sources.²⁷⁹

It is easy to see the similarities between feminist liberation theology and the original theology of liberation from Latin America. Both approach the Gospel and Christian tradition from the point of view of an oppressed population, both reinterpret traditional Christian concepts to meet the needs of these present-day populations, and

²⁷⁷ "Feminist Theology," 306-307.

²⁷⁸ "Feminist Theology," 307.

²⁷⁹ Clifford, 300-307.

both see social justice and equality as the core of all Christian teaching and theology. While both embrace the title of theology of liberation, they concentrate on the liberation of distinct groups within their respective societies. Interestingly enough, both have also embraced environmentalism as an integral part of the Christian life. Anne M. Clifford summarizes it well:

While affirming [the reality of the Holy Spirit in the lives of women], feminist spirituality, in company with other Christian liberation movements, denounces domination in all unjust systems while discerning the freeing truth of the Gospel.²⁸⁰

Most of what I have said about the connection between Latin American liberation theology and feminist theology holds true for homosexual liberation theology, commonly known as queer theology or gay theology. There are many varieties of homosexual theology, some focused on self-acceptance for the gay individual and some on homosexuals being able to enlighten and revitalize the ecumenical Church. Some even call for the complete transcendence of sexuality within the religious sphere, citing the teachings of Gregory of Nyssa that our spirits in the afterlife will be genderless and that we should therefore strive to achieve this genderlessness on earth.²⁸¹ However, the movement within homosexual theology that has the most in common with Latin American liberation theology is Liberationist Gay Theology. It grounds itself in the communal experience of oppression that gay Christians have undergone and the way in

²⁸⁰ Clifford, 299.

²⁸¹ Elizabeth Steward, "Homosexuality," *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Philip Sheldrake. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 345-346.

which these gay Christians and the ecumenical Church can work to end this oppression and establish a just Kingdom of God on earth. Theologian Robert Goss has developed a Christology specifically for the movement, asserting that since Jesus took the side of the oppressed throughout his life on earth, the Resurrection of Jesus is God's moment of "coming out" on the side of the oppressed and affirming that Jesus' message is also God's message.²⁸² Though the textual basis of this theology proves a bit shaky, Liberationist Gay Theology accomplishes for the homosexual population what Latin American liberation theology has accomplished for the poor of Latin America: it gives them a compassionate and liberating theology that is relevant to their particular lives.

The last movement I will address is the Social Gospel movement, which I believe holds the most in common with liberation theology as it has manifested itself in Latin America. A significant part of North American Christianity from 1875 to 1930,²⁸³ the Social Gospel movement and the Social Christianity from which it sprang came about, much like Catholic social teaching, in response to the industrial revolution and the unhealthy situations it created for workers. The first movements of Social Christianity started in Great Britain, but the ideology quickly spread to the United States, where it was initially adopted by evangelicals like minister Washington Gladden and missionary Josiah Strong.²⁸⁴ However, it wasn't until 1907, when Rochester Theological Seminary professor Walter Rauschenbusch published his book *Christianity and the Social Crisis* that the Social Gospel found its prophet and spokesperson and really began to flourish in

²⁸² Steward, 345.

²⁸³ "A Theology for the Social Gospel by Walter Rauschenbusch," *Masterpieces of Christian Literature in Summary Form*, (Frank N. Magill and Ian P. McGreal, Ed. 1 vol. New York: Harper Row Publishers, 1963), 886-887.

²⁸⁴ "Social Gospel," *The Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Ed. Daniel G Reid. 1 vol. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 1104.

the United States. Under Rauschenbusch's lead, the movement turned away from conservative evangelicalism to a more moderate reformism influenced by liberal theological developments.²⁸⁵

The Social Gospel taught a worldview and ethos of Christian action remarkably similar to that of liberation theology. It focused on the life and teachings of the historical Jesus, particularly his announcement of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Contrary to traditional Christian theology but more closely in line with the actual teachings of Jesus, the Social Gospel taught that the Kingdom of God would be realized on earth in the form of social justice and harmony and that it was the Christian's responsibility to follow in the ways of Christ and bring the Kingdom to fruition. Like liberation theology, the Social Gospel preferred an immanent God who was and is immediately involved in the progression of history.²⁸⁶ Though the Social Gospel certainly affirmed the reality and evils of individual sin, it focused on the social sins of unjust societal structures and neglect of the poor, calling the ecumenical Church to put its efforts toward countering these evils instead of simply promoting personal piety.²⁸⁷ In Rauschenbusch's own words:

To find the climax of sin, we must not linger over a man who swears, or sneers at religion, or denies the mystery of the Trinity, but put our hands on social groups who have turned the patrimony of a nation into the private property of a small class, or have left the peasant laborers cowed, degraded, demoralized, and without rights in the land. When we find such

²⁸⁵ "Social Gospel," 1104.

²⁸⁶ "Social Gospel," 1105.

²⁸⁷ *Masterpieces*, 887-888.

in history or in present-day life, we shall know we have struck real rebellion against God on the higher levels of sin.²⁸⁸

While the teachings of the Social Gospel are virtually the same as those of liberation theology, in practice it looked a little different. While liberation theology advocated revolution and a vast restructuring of political and social systems, the Social Gospel held to a plan of reform within the existing political structures. It worked to increase social awareness and action among churches, especially concerning the plight of the industrial workers and their rights to unionize. It concentrated on getting these workers more actively involved in the democratic political process so that their voices could be heard and they themselves could work to bring about change. It also pushed for courses on ethics and the sociology of religion to be taught in seminaries so that the future leaders of the ecumenical Church would be educated in these subjects so often neglected but so close to the heart of the Gospel. Members of the Social Gospel movement called their work the “Christianizing of society,” but it was Christianizing in a very different sense than that of evangelical missional theology. While the latter worked to convert individuals to Christianity for the sake of their own spiritual salvation, the Social Gospel worked to convert social institutions into more just structures that would better the material life of all and help bring about worldly salvation through the building of God’s Kingdom on earth.²⁸⁹

The Social Gospel movement continued until about the middle of the twentieth century, spreading from the United States to Canada and from Protestantism into certain

²⁸⁸ *Masterpieces*, 888.

²⁸⁹ “Social Gospel,” 1104-1105.

elements of Catholic social teaching. However, in the years following World War I, the influence of the Social Gospel declined in the face of criticism from historical realists who claimed it was unrealistic and naïve and Christian fundamentalists who replaced the Social Gospel's understanding of the Kingdom of God with a premillennialist interpretation that remains in many Christian circles today. By the middle of the twentieth century, when liberation theology was getting its start in Latin America, the Social Gospel had faded from its role as a major player on the political and religious scenes of the United States.²⁹⁰

In summary, though liberation theology was and continues to be a revolutionary movement within Christianity, it has strong Biblical and historical foundations, and its ideals have been embodied in many movements throughout the history of Christianity. As we conclude with an analysis of liberation theology's overall significance in the history of the ecumenical Church, it is important to remember liberation theology's roots within Christianity and, despite the criticism it has so often received, its striking similarities to the teachings of Jesus.

²⁹⁰ "Social Gospel," 1105.

Conclusion

To bring this argument to a close, I wish to reassert that although liberation theology has declined and is no longer the news-making movement it once was, it remains active in Latin America and other areas of the world and an important part of the Christian call for social justice. Its effects in Latin America can be seen in the work of the modern-day liberation theologians and grassroots Church movements as well as in the recent political shift to the left that the region has experienced, in some cases led by liberation theologians themselves like President Fernando Lugo of Paraguay. Its role in Christian social justice movements can be understood through its grounding in the Bible, particularly the teachings of Jesus, its consonance with Catholic social teaching, and its continuation of the spirit of many other movements within Christianity that in one way or another have embodied the “preferential option for the poor.” Liberation theology is neither dead, failed, nor the unexpected revolution that many have labeled it. It is rather one significant but small part of a movement toward social justice in both Christianity and Latin America.

However, such an understanding of liberation theology prompts the question of what makes liberation theology unique and deserving of such in-depth analysis in the first place. To answer this, I would like to highlight three features of liberation theology that I argue are its own unique contributions to Christianity. These include liberation theology’s use of Marxism for sociological analysis, its understanding of a “preferential option for the poor” in the Kingdom of God, and its uniquely Latin American worldview and reinterpretation of traditional Christian teachings.

As I mentioned when describing its basic ideology and have alluded to many times since, liberation theology actively employs Marxism to interpret and understand the plight of the poor in Latin America and other developing countries. Marxism has traditionally been viewed as incompatible with any sort of religion, as Marx labeled religion the “opiate of the masses” which uses its “absolute claim to truth” to justify the state’s oppressive and alienating capitalism.²⁹¹ However, liberation theologians maintain, despite the discrepancies of opinion within Catholic social teaching, that Marxism can be used as a tool for social and economic analysis without fully embracing Marx’s philosophy of life and humanity.²⁹² They assert that Marx’s words from his 1875 Critique of the Gotha Programme, “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs,”²⁹³ and the author of Acts’ description of first-century Christianity, “They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need,”²⁹⁴ point to the same economic philosophy and furthermore, that this philosophy is the basis of the Kingdom of God. With Michael Löwy, liberation theology asserts that there is a “selective affinity,” to borrow from Max Weber, between Christianity, particularly Roman Catholicism, and socialism.²⁹⁵ No Christians before or since have dared to embrace Marxism with such fervor, but liberation theologians’ courage to do so changed the course of Christian history.

The second unique contribution that liberation theology has made to Christianity is its understanding of a “preferential option for the poor.” The poor were *a* if not *the*

²⁹¹ Martin, 73-76.

²⁹² Boffs, *Introduction*, 86-87.

²⁹³ Karl Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme (1875),” *Marx/Engels Selected Works* (1970. Progress Publishers. 12 Apr. 2009 <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/index.htm>>).

²⁹⁴ Acts 2:45.

²⁹⁵ Löwy and Pompan, 30-33.

central focus of Jesus' teachings and since then have remained, at least in theory, a central part of Christianity. However, liberation theology is arguably the first movement since that of Jesus himself to interpret the Gospel, as modern-day Bolivian liberation theologian Victor Codina put it, from "the optic of the poor."²⁹⁶ While other similar movements, like the Franciscan Order and the Social Gospel movement, look at the situation of the poor from the perspective of an outside, wealthy Church, liberation theology understands that it is the poor *themselves* who make up the Church of Jesus Christ. According to Jon Sobrino, the revolutionary miracle of the Incarnation was not that God became human but that God became human "from below;" Jesus was a humble man of low social standing who showed grace to all but exhibited a "preferential option for the poor" in his ministry.²⁹⁷ Just as Jesus declared that the poor would be the ones to inherit the Kingdom of God and Marx taught that the Proletariat must initiate the revolution to set themselves free, so liberation theologians believe that the poor should be the agents of their own liberation.²⁹⁸ Rejecting the aid mentality that the Church has held for so long, liberation theology proclaims that the marginalized of society are the privileged of the Church who alone can establish and teach the universal Church about the Kingdom of God.

Third and finally, liberation theology has developed a version of Christianity that is uniquely suited to Latin American culture and resonates with the many diverse populations that live in Central and South America. It has taken the whole Church, the Catholic Church in particular, far too long to understand that its Western Christianity based in Rome is not universally relevant to the lives of Christians around the world.

²⁹⁶ Codina,, 64.

²⁹⁷ O'Sullivan 2007.

²⁹⁸ Löwy, 35-37.

Particularly in light of the fact that Latin America has the highest concentration of Roman Catholics in the world,²⁹⁹ liberation theology reminds the Western world that Christianity has more to do with a poor family in the Peru blessing a meal with than a man in clerical collar addressing a congregation in Rome. Likewise, liberation theology reminds the Churches of Latin America and other non-Western countries that they have just as great a share as anyone else in the message of Jesus; in fact, it is their poor and oppressed masses who will inherit the Kingdom.

Their heyday of liberation theology may have passed, but its effects cannot be reversed and its spirit cannot be silenced. It has certainly declined and changed, but to call it a dead movement would be an uninformed error. Liberation theology continues to be an important part of a tradition of social justice within Christianity that was and is and evermore shall be.

²⁹⁹ Polgreen and Rohter 2005.

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