

Latin American Liberation Theology

By **Éric Morales-Franceschini** | May 9, 2018

“Liberation theology” was the name given to a species of theology that emerged in late 1960s and early 1970s Latin America. It called for a radical reassessment of theology, pastoral works, and the Catholic Church itself. The Church and its clergy had historically coexisted with -- or morally authorized -- slavery, conquest, colonialism, and neocolonialism. By the late 1960s, this was no longer as politically, let alone ethically, tolerable. Anticolonial wars and national liberation struggles had erupted throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America as the “Third World” came to signify an anti-imperialist project to build a world predicated on equity, solidarity, and sovereignty.

In the midst of these revolutionary times was convened the Second Vatican Council, colloquially known as Vatican II (1962-65), out of which came a call for a more “worldly” Catholic Church. The clergy of the Third World made it clear, however, that a “worldlier” Church was not merely one in which priests wore less ornate regalia and held Mass in vernacular languages (in lieu of Latin). A “worldlier” Church was to be one that solemnly reckoned with dire issues in the world, not least of which was poverty.

In 1968, Latin American Bishops convened in Medellín, Colombia to flesh out the “spirit” of Vatican II. Out of that conference emerged declarations that rejected poverty as the lot of morally or intellectually inferior peoples. They concluded, rather, that poverty was a species of “institutionalized violence” and that our lives are lived in a situation of “social sin” insofar as we can but collectively choose not to eradicate poverty. The proper Christian choice is to “opt for the poor” (Ellacuría and Sobrino, 1994).

These insights and intuitions were more rigorously teased out in what became the movement’s hallmark text, *A Theology of Liberation* (1971), by Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez. For Gutiérrez, it did not suffice to address poverty and other social ills in the technocratic and spiritually vacant terms of “development.” Instead, Gutiérrez called for “liberation,” by which he meant not only liberation from repressive economic and political structures but also liberation from sin. Liberation as such amounts to a project for a “new humanity,” which Gutiérrez consciously put in dialogue with (atheist) Ernesto Che Guevara’s (1965) concept of the new socialist man and woman. That new humanity would be one that answers the Christian call to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, and care for the ill.^[1] Indeed, for Gutiérrez, whatever the analytic value of Marxist social and political theory, liberation theology and its praxis are to be nourished by biblical texts and utopian hope in salvation. Liberation theology can look to the Exodus narrative of a God who hears the cry of his oppressed people and leads them out of (Egyptian) bondage; the Old Testament prophets (i.e. Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah, etc.) who decry the exploitation of the poor and summon their fellow Israelites to care for the orphan, the widow, and the stranger; the Gospels, with a stress on Jesus’ teachings to love thy neighbor and with a divine who chose to

incarnate in the flesh of a humble worker (carpenter) who is imprisoned, tortured, and executed by corrupt elites and an imperial power; and the Acts of the Apostles, who shared their property and lived in common.

In concrete terms, this meant new pastoral works and a new Church. A Church roused by liberation theology would be a Church that prophetically denounced injustices and evangelized in order to raise consciousness (*concientización*), taking its cues from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) as much as from the Bible. The popular and impoverished classes would learn that their misery is structurally induced and repressively enforced; that such misery is an offense to God, in whose likeness and image all are made; and that they have the capacity to collectively build a world governed by hope and love.[2] Clergy were accordingly called to be "poor in spirit." [3] Per Gutiérrez (1971), this meant not merely to renounce worldly goods and surrender one's self to God, but to live in solidarity with the poor and speak out against poverty. So too was the Church expected to rethink its structures whether this meant to sell off its property, decentralize its authority, or ordain women as priests. Indeed, the fruits of liberation theology included a movement to found a "popular Church." Christian base communities (also referred to as base ecclesial communities) blossomed throughout the 1970s and 80s, most especially in Brazil, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Grassroots-organized and lay-led, they brought together economically marginalized families and neighborhoods to discuss and solve their problems in light of liberation praxis. One was no longer a parishioner or a victim, but a lay minister who partook in study, prayer, deliberations, and "salvific" works that empowered the powerless. As Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff (1985) put it, base communities constituted a Church of and with the poor, not merely a Church for the poor.

The overwhelmingly Catholic and unequal Brazil proved fertile soil for liberation theology, with an estimated 70,000 base communities and advocates as courageous and as high-profiled as Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns, affectionately known as Dom Paulo. The Church in Brazil decried the human rights violations of the national security state and became an asylum for the politically persecuted. The Chile of Salvador Allende's Popular Unity coalition (1970-73) also cordially received the talents and endorsements of progressive Christians, including eighty Catholic priests (the "Group of 80") who openly opted for socialism. With the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua (1979-1990), liberation theology took governmental office, with priests Miguel D'Escoto as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Ernesto Cardenal as Minister of Culture. So too was it artistically expressed in Sandinista murals, poetry, and music, such as Cardenal's *Psalms of Struggle and Liberation* (1964) and Carlos Mejía Godoy's *nueva canción*-stylized *Misa campesina nicaragüense* (Nicaraguan Peasants' Mass). In Haiti, liberation theology found an eloquent orator in Salesian priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1990), who was elected president in 1990.

But neither the Church hierarchy nor political and economic elites took kindly to a theology conversant with Marxist analysis and socialist politics. Critics dismissed it as a theology that, at best, sullied faith with politics or, at worst, condoned "class struggle" and violence. Colombian priest Camilo Torres, who joined guerrilla forces and died in combat (1966), was routinely cited as such a scandal. Vatican officiate Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) issued his infamous "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation" in 1984, warning of the "serious deviations" liberation theology posed and the

Marxist “temptations” to which it fell prey. Nor did Pope John Paul II, who hailed from Soviet Poland, take kindly to liberation theology. In his 1983 visit to Sandinista Nicaragua, he publicly scolded Ernesto Cardenal, an image that circulated throughout the world’s corporate-financed media, and in 1985 silenced Leonardo Boff. His most consequential acts were, however, to appoint conservative bishops throughout Latin America (Berryman 1987, 108-110).

The repression of liberation theology beyond Church hierarchy was, however, far more vicious. Several radio stations, newsletters, bishops, priests, and nuns sympathetic to liberation theology were bombed, censored, harassed, expelled, imprisoned, tortured, disappeared or assassinated between the 1960s and 1980s throughout Latin America. Arguably nowhere was this as viscerally true as in El Salvador. Here, Archbishop Oscar Romero was gunned down while delivering Mass in 1980; three American nuns and a missionary were raped and murdered in 1980; and Jesuit theologian and rector Ignacio Ellacuría was murdered with five other priests at the Central American University in 1989. Nor was the United States an ally to liberation theology. Ronald Reagan’s foreign policy framed it as a “weapon against private property and productive capitalism” (Berryman 1987, 4).

The legacy of Latin American liberation theology is nevertheless rich. In its wake emerged iterations of Jewish liberation theology (Ellis 1989), Palestinian liberation theology (Ateek 2017), Islamic liberation theology (Dabashi 2008), mujerista and feminist theology (Aquino 1993; Isasi-Díaz 1996), black liberation theology (Cone 1970 & 1975), minjung theology in Korea (Kim & Kim 2013), and Dalit theology in India (Rajkumar 2016). Liberation theology even reached Fidel Castro in officially atheist Cuba. Brazilian friar Frei Betto’s interview with the revolutionary icon, *Fidel and Religion* (1985), became an international bestseller. In it, the Jesuit-educated Fidel pointed out that Christianity’s credo of service to others, humility, austerity, compassion, and martyrdom had far more in common with communism than it did capitalism. By the early 1990s, Cuba was declared a secular state and atheism no longer a prerequisite to join the Cuban Communist Party. Hugo Chávez would later describe Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution (1998-) as nourished ideologically and spiritually by Simón Bolívar, Karl Marx, and Christ the Redeemer. Gustavo Gutiérrez’s writings and exemplary life inspired medical doctor Paul Farmer to found Partners in Health (1987-), a social justice-based organization that serves and accompanies the ill of the Global South. In Brazil, Cardinal Arns, Frei Betto, and progressive Catholics served as moral consultants and protagonists to the Workers’ Party, whose social welfare policies lifted millions out of abject poverty. Theologians and priests like Frei Betto, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Jon Sobrino (in El Salvador), and Leonardo Boff continue to write and speak publicly. Boff (1997) in particular has called for a liberation theology that bears witness to the “cry of the earth” — a cry evidently heard by Pope Francis, the first Latin American Pope (inaugurated 2013) in the history of the Church. While not openly affiliated with liberation theology, the Pope’s encyclical *Laudato Si* (2015) refers to the capitalist world system as “structurally perverse” and calls on “people of good will” to liberate themselves from a “defied market” and “technocratic paradigm” that fails to lovingly embrace “God’s creation” (i.e. animals and the environment) as did St. Francis of Assisi.

That said, it is questionable whether the Bible and Christianity shall constitute a vanguard for green politics. Other cosmologies and spiritual traditions have proven far richer

resources. Ecuador's buen vivir/sumak kawsay (Acosta 2013) and Bolivia's vivir bien/suma qamaña (Huanacuni 2010) movements have more convincingly posited post-capitalist horizons for "living well" and more harmoniously with Pachamama (Mother Earth). This too raises the question about liberation theology's fixation on Christianity in a region where Amerindian and African diasporic religions thrive, not coincidentally, amongst the poor. Critics have argued that Latin American liberation theology has yet to meaningfully look to Lucumí (Cuba and Puerto Rico), Candomblé (Brazil), or Vodou (Haiti) as resources for serious theological inquiry and emancipatory praxis (Torre 2004). That these faiths are so intimately bound to the history of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the Americas is no idle detail. It bespeaks a religiosity that for generations has dignified and empowered the socially stigmatized and economically exploited. Nor has liberation theology satisfactorily shed its "masculine" profile. Nearly all of its theologians, prophets, and martyrs are men. The tendency, moreover, has been to circumscribe women and the Virgin Mary within the realm of (motherly) care, devotion, and compassion — that is to say, an essentialist account of the "feminine" (Boff 1987). Feminist theologians, by contrast, have offered more nuanced accounts of the prophetesses and women disciples of the Bible (i.e. Miriam, Deborah, Judith, Mary Magdalen) and have called on their colleagues and lay kin to more earnestly reckon with sexuality, women's reproductive rights, and the ordination of women as priests — all stubbornly "taboo" subjects within the Catholic Church hierarchy and theological seminaries (Aquino & Rosado-Nunes 2007).

Whether liberation theology can be revitalized as an efficacious theology for the twenty-first century Global South is subject to debate. As a reply to criticisms that it was pseudo-politics, many adherents sought to legitimize it as theology proper. This has amounted, argues Argentine theologian Iván Petrella (2004), to a theology more concerned with scriptural exegesis than emancipatory praxis. The fact that it has been taken up by (upper) middle-class intellectuals and institutions of the Global North is no less noteworthy. As Petrella has noted, liberation theology as such is more closely aligned with identity politics and has all but disavowed the analysis of political economy and liberation's "material" horizons. Liberation theology nevertheless remains a salient referent for critical theory and the "resistant imaginary" that is the Global South (Mahler 2017). For no longer is that imaginary as wedded to atheist Marxism or secular bourgeois liberalism as it once was. Today, liberative praxis and its "decolonial options" (Mignolo 2011) are ever more intriguingly postsecular.

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[1] According to the Bible (Matthew 25: 31-40), these are the criteria by which all "nations" will be judged as worthy (or not) to inherit the "kingdom of heaven."

[2] Genesis 1: 26-27.

[3] This is a reference to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and the first of eight so-called Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:3

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