Also by Phillip Berryman

Inside Central America: The Essential Facts Past and Present on El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and Costa Rica

The Religious Roots of Rebellion: Christians in Central American Revolutions

LIBERATION THEOLOGY

ESSENTIAL FACTS ABOUT THE REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT IN LATIN AMERICA—AND BEYOND

PHILLIP BERRYMAN

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS
PHILADELPHIA
CONTENTS

Introduction 1

1 Birth Pangs: Emergence of Liberation Theology 9

2 Going to the Poor 29

3 Mirror of Life: The Bible Read by the Poor 45

4 A New Model of Church: Christian Base Communities 63

5 Feet-on-the-Ground: From Experience to Theology 80

6 Captivity and Hope: Shifting Contexts of Liberation Theology 96
On Sunday morning, March 23, 1980, I was in the crowded church in San Salvador where Archbishop Oscar Romero was preaching. Poor people, elbow to elbow, overflowed from the aisles in the late morning heat. For over an hour Romero wove a commentary on the scriptural passages for the day, the fourth Sunday in Lent, around the theme of liberation in one’s own person, in the community, and in relation to God.

Romero’s voice was being transmitted through the countryside for the first time in weeks, after bomb damage to the archdiocesan radio station had been repaired. During the last part of the sermon Romero commented briefly on many events of the previous week that the media would not report or would cover only in distorted versions. The National Guard was accusing Father Ricardo Ayala of being involved with guerrillas;
the police had made a search of a parish house of some Belgian priests; the archdiocese was opening facilities to take in refugees fleeing violence in the countryside; troops had surrounded the national university for a whole day; other troops had stormed the Catholic university and killed a student; throughout the week many people had been arrested unjustly. Amnesty International had found some 83 people had been killed between March 10 and 14. (Although guerrilla war was not to break out for many months, the church later documented 588 killings during this month, almost all the work of government and right-wing forces.)

Romero ended with a plea to members of the army and the security forces not to kill the peasants.

My brothers, they are part of our very own people. You are killing your own fellow peasants. God's law, "Thou shalt not kill!" takes precedence over a human being's order to kill. No soldier is obliged to obey an order that is against God's law. No one has to obey an immoral law.

He continued pleading with them—even ordering them—to stop the repression.

After the mass I was talking with a theologian who was close to Romero. When I expressed my concern about such a direct challenge to the military, he said the matter had been discussed during the regular Saturday afternoon meeting of a team of priests, sisters, and lay people with whom Romero consulted for his sermons. The team had agreed that the level of killing made it necessary despite the risk.

I was in El Salvador with an ecumenical church group. After the mass we attended a press conference, then met with Romero and some of his advisors. With his crew cut and glasses, and his clerical demeanor, Romero did not fit my idea of a prophet. Later in the afternoon we interviewed some of the first refugees of the conflict, whom he had received on the grounds of the seminary where the archdiocesan offices were also located. Late that night, as I was walking down a deserted avenue in San Salvador, I began to wonder whether this sermon might not seal Romero's fate.

The next day in the street we found a mimeographed hate sheet comparing Romero to Khomeini. On Monday evening, as we were interviewing the Salvadoran Human Rights Commission, word arrived that Romero had been shot while saying mass. We spent the next two days in the company of his stunned and grief-stricken coworkers; the funeral itself was disrupted by a bomb and automatic weapon attack.

Those moments—that sermon, Romero's murder, his farewell—are among the most important in my life. They also express the core of liberation theology. What the archbishop said had an undeniable political impact—he was telling soldiers to disobey. Yet he was simply reminding them of God's command "Thou shalt not kill!" His aim in preaching was to point to the genuine theological sense of the pain and struggle in El Salvador, and to enable people to continue hoping. Out of a similar kind of faith many Latin Americans have risked and sacrificed their lives.

Liberation theology has attracted considerable attention in recent years. On each of Pope John Paul II's major trips to Latin America (Mexico, 1979; Brazil, 1980; Central America, 1983; Andean countries of South America, 1985), he has issued warnings apparently aimed at theologians. In September 1984 the Vatican published a major document pointing to its dangers, and in 1985 it silenced the Brazilian Franciscan priest Leonardo Boff. In Nicaragua priests serve in a revolutionary government, while the Catholic bishops are leading opposition figures.

The controversy is not a purely internal church matter; it has played a major role in the Reagan administration's efforts to justify its Central American policy. A 1980 document blueprinting a new policy on Latin America, written by the Committee of Santa Fe, whose members were part of the Reagan circle, stated that "U.S. policy must begin to counter (not react against) liberation theology as it is utilized in Latin America by the 'liberation theology' clergy."
Journalistic accounts all too easily reinforce simplistic stereotypes, portraying liberation theology as an exotic brew of Marxism and Christianity, or as a movement of rebel priests bent on challenging church authority. The aim of this book is quite simply to get beyond the clichés and to explain what liberation theology is (primarily in Latin America), how it arose, how it works in practice, and its implications. Some initial observations may be helpful for beginning the discussion.

Liberation theology is theology—that is, it is a systematic, disciplined reflection on Christian faith and its implications. Its proponents were trained as theologians, usually in Europe, and they write about the same topics that Christian theologians have always taken up: God, creation, Jesus Christ, the church, grace, and so forth. This point is not always self-evident. The Santa Fe Committee accuses liberation theologians of using the church "as a political weapon against private property and productive capitalism by infiltrating the religious community with ideas that are less Christian than Communist."

Readers will be able to judge for themselves whether that accusation is accurate or fair. At this point I would simply assert that one cannot understand liberation theology unless one sees it as theology.

Unlike their colleagues in other parts of the world, these theologians generally do not teach in universities and seminars, at least not full-time. They are a relatively small group. Those who have published significant works number about two or three dozen. They are almost all male, and most are Catholic clerics, although Protestants have played important roles in the movement. These theologians often serve as advisors to grassroots groups and to priests, sisters, and pastors working with grassroots groups. Most of them spend some of their time working directly with the poor themselves. The questions they deal with are those that arise out of this contact with the poor.

In fact, liberation theology is an interpretation of Christian faith out of the experience of the poor. It is an attempt to read the Bible and key Christian doctrines with the eyes of the poor.

It is at the same time an attempt to help the poor interpret their own faith in a new way. To take a simple but central example, in traditional Latin American piety Jesus is almost mute, indeed most often represented dead on the cross. Perhaps the fact that their society crucifies them and keeps them mute makes ordinary Latin Americans identify with such a Christ. Liberation theology focuses on Jesus' life and message. For example, in his initial sermon, a kind of manifesto, Jesus quotes Isaiah, "He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives . . ." and says that the passage is fulfilled in him. The poor learn to read the Scripture in a way that affirms their dignity and self-worth and their right to struggle together for a more decent life.

People do not simply happen to be poor; their poverty is largely a product of the way society is organized. Hence, liberation theology is a critique of economic structures that enable some Latin Americans to jet to Miami or London to shop, while most of their fellow citizens do not have safe drinking water. In particular, liberation theologians have critiqued the ideologies that justify such inequality, including their use of religious symbols. Military dictatorships have often practiced torture to defend what they are fond of calling "Western 'Christian' civilization."

A further area of questioning has been the activity of the church and of Christians. By what criterion should the church organize its pastoral work? Take, for example, the question of church unity. As the level of social conflict increases and societies become polarized, Christians find themselves on opposing sides. Unity, however, is supposed to be one of the distinguishing features of Christianity. What should be the criterion for such unity? Obedience to the bishops and the pope? Is division in the church to be avoided at all cost? Liberation theology seeks to respond to questions and seeming dilemmas that arise out of the experience of the church, often in conflictive situations.

As an initial description, we may say that liberation theology is
1. An interpretation of Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the poor.
2. A critique of society and the ideologies sustaining it.
3. A critique of the activity of the church and of Christians from the angle of the poor.

This is at once a new interpretation of the meaning of Christianity and the recovery of a prophetic tradition present in the Bible itself. That tradition has periodically recurred within the history of Christianity, although it is usually suppressed as heresy.

Liberation theology is not unique to Latin America: there are new Asian and African Christian theologies, as well as feminist theology and black theology. The poor, nonwhites, and women are finding new meaning in Christian faith as well as revealing the shortcomings of interpretations made by white Western males.

The shift underway may turn out to be as significant as the Protestant Reformation, which began as a revolt against corrupt practices in the Roman church, and quickly became a new Bible-based theology and a new model of church. With their stress on personal conversion and conviction, the Reformation churches were more in tune with the modern age than Roman Catholicism, and indeed they helped shape that age. What began as a religious movement had a profound impact on subsequent history. It is conceivable that liberation theology represents the initial phase of a comparable shift in the history of Christianity and that its impact will go far beyond the churches.

Liberation theology is also one manifestation of a worldwide movement for human emancipation. That may sound almost archaic in the United States and Western Europe in the mid-1980s, when journalists are fond of seeing any political activism as a throwback to the 1960s and in particular to uprisings in the United States. Yet surely the twentieth century will turn out to be more than the "American century." When the history of our age is written—perhaps by a nonwhite hand—it may also be the story of the emergence onto the stage of history of the poor majority of the human family.

It could be argued that one cannot understand Latin America today without understanding what liberation theology represents. The fates of North America and Latin America are increasingly interconnected; just consider the Latin American debt. Few have noticed that of the twelve hundred delegates to a conference on the debt held in Havana in August 1985 over one hundred were Catholic priests. In his closing address Premier Fidel Castro read a letter from Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns of São Paulo, Brazil, to the conference, stating that the debt should not be paid at the cost of the poor. The delegates gave a prolonged standing ovation. As the debt crisis deepens, will liberation theology be a factor leading the church to take a prominent role?

A person seeking to understand liberation theology can already find a number of translations and surveys in English. Virtually all of them, however, are published by church-related presses and are directed primarily to a church public. What I have attempted here is to make this movement intelligible to a general public, drawing on twenty years of my own experience. While serving as a Catholic priest in a barrio in Panama City in the 1960s, I went to South America to seek out Latin American theologians. Although I resigned from the priesthood in 1973, my work, especially as American Friends Service Committee representative in Central America from 1976 to 1980, has kept me close to the Latin American church. What I have learned there, the ideas of the theologians as well as commitment like Archbishop Romero's, has been a kind of compass for my own life, however errantly I may follow it.

A reader who casually picks up the writings of liberation theologians might be surprised at the seemingly abstract tone. As much as the theologians insist on the primacy of "praxis," they do not devote much attention to specific experiences and events. They seem to assume that their readers—Latin Americans—do not need to be reminded of local and specific realities. In this book I have tried to root liberation theology in
events, and to show its practical impact at the village and barrio level. Nevertheless, my aim is not to tell the story of the churches in Latin America—that can already be found in many fine recent works—but to explain as clearly as possible the ideas of liberation theologians.

I have been struck by the divergence between North American assumptions and Latin American questions. For example, almost any lecture on liberation theology in the United States or Europe will elicit questions on violence and on Marxism. Yet the theologians have very little—practically nothing—to say on violence and devote surprisingly little attention to discussion of Marxism. On the other hand, they spend a great deal of time on seemingly ethereal questions such as the relationship between the kingdom of God and efforts to achieve human dignity here and now. I have tried to center this presentation on what the liberation theologians consider important, while at the same time remaining sensitive to the questions of audiences in the more developed countries of the West.

Chapter One describes the overall context of the 1960s and the initial proposals of the theologians. Chapters Two through Four focus on how liberation theology functions at the village or barrio level. In Chapter Five I make some observations on the theologians' overall enterprise. Chapter Six then describes the changing context from the early 1970s to the present. There follow several chapters on particular topics, especially those related to liberation theology's political impact. Chapter Eleven surveys Third World, black, Hispanic, and feminist theologies. Chapter Twelve discusses the major objections posed by critics. The book closes with a tentative assessment of liberation theology and its future.

1. BIRTH PANGS

Emergence of Liberation Theology

At the heart of any city or town in Latin America is a plaza. Along one side stands a cathedral, church, or chapel and along another side the presidential palace, city hall, or other official building. The architectural embodiments of the religious and civil powers face each other across the center of inhabited space.

From its first appearance in the New World, the Catholic church was part of the overall enterprise of conquest and colonization of the native peoples by Spain and Portugal and the imposition of colonial rule. Pope Alexander VI adjudicated the division of the new continent between Spain and Portugal and conferred on their monarchies the right and duty of propagating the Catholic faith. Moreover, the conquest brought a particularly aggressive kind of Catholicism, reflecting both the period
in which Spain defeated the Moors, and Catholicism’s vigorous reaction to the Protestant Reformation.

Some of the early missionaries, however, protested the cruelty of the conquest. The most well known is Bartolomé de las Casas, who came to Hispaniola in 1502 (his father and brothers had been part of Columbus’ second voyage). Las Casas became a Dominican priest in 1512. Although he himself had held Indian slaves, las Casas experienced a conversion reading the book of Sirach, including this verse: “He slays his neighbor who deprives him of his living; he sheds blood who denies the laborer his wages” (34:22). He went on to devote his life to struggling on behalf of the Indians. Las Casas argued that the Indians were better off as living pagans than as dead Christians, and insisted that they must be won over by the power of the gospel rather than the force of arms. Well over a dozen of the bishops in the sixteenth century, mainly Dominicans, were outstanding in their defense of the Indians. The bishop of Nicaragua, Antonio de Valdivieso, was even stabbed to death in 1550 by one of the governor’s henchmen. Today’s liberation theologians regard this early generation of bishops as their precursors. They were exceptions, however.

The model of social order the Iberian conquerors brought was that of “christendom.” Since the fall of the Roman Empire European society had been ruled by a kind of dual power, civil and ecclesiastical. The church could count on the backing of civil authority, and the civil authority was seen as rooted in a superior order that reached up to the very throne of God. Relations were not always harmonious, but the overall pattern was that of a single “Christian” society where civil and religious authority were closely connected. This model arrived in Latin America just as it was beginning to unravel in Europe, starting with the Protestant Reformation. The Latin American form aptly can be called “colonial christendom.”

Since monasteries, convents, and churches were located in the towns, the poor in the outlying areas had only occasional contact with the church’s official representatives. To a great extent they accepted Catholicism on their own terms. Their religion, with its own prayers and devotions, its own concerns and interests, its own center of gravity and worldview—what scholars would later call “popular Catholicism”—was transmitted more through family and village than through the official church.

During the years 1808 to 1824 Latin America broke away from Spain and Portugal. The independence movement was largely the work of the local elites, who were motivated not only by nationalism but by a desire to be free to trade directly with the new center of world power, Great Britain. The poor served in the armies that struggled for independence, but they reaped little benefit. They remained under the domination of the local landholding and commercial classes. Although Latin American countries have been formally independent since the early nineteenth century, today many regard full nationhood as unfinished business.

For the Catholic church the independence struggle and its aftermath meant a severe crisis. The bishops tended to side with the Spanish Crown, and popes made pronouncements against the independence struggle in 1816 and 1823. Many clerics, on the other hand, supported independence (for example, the well-known Mexican priests Hidalgo and Morelos).

Nevertheless, independence led to institutional crisis. The Vatican only began to recognize the new states in 1831, and many bishops departed, leaving some dioceses vacant. The church became tied to so-called Conservative parties that battled parties designated “Liberal” in almost all countries. The Liberals viewed themselves as the party of progress and development, especially by expanding export agriculture. They found it convenient to pass laws that would enable them to confiscate land from Catholic religious orders and Indians. To their “progressive” eyes, these were backward or obscurantist elements.

As a result of independence and attacks from Liberal governments, the Catholic church was thrust into a situation of chronic weakness and crisis. One consequence is that most Latin American countries have never produced sufficient clergy and have depended on a steady flow from Europe. Today the
Catholic clergy in several countries—Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, Venezuela, Panama, Bolivia—is around 80 percent foreign.

Protestant missionary efforts began during the closing decades of the last century. Liberal governments often saw Protestants as representing "modernity" and as a useful force for countering "backward" Catholicism. Evangelical missionaries often brought an amalgam of fundamentalism and U.S. cultural patterns (American hymns set to Spanish words), while those of more liberal tendencies brought the "social gospel" with American assumptions (U.S. electoral democracy). Despite impressive growth rates Protestants remained a minority, and most Latin Americans continued to see themselves as Catholic.

During the first half of the twentieth century Latin American Catholicism began to rebound. One sign was the growth of Catholic Action movements among workers and students. In 1955 bishops from all over the continent met in Rio de Janeiro for the first plenary meeting of CELAM (Latin American Bishops' Conference). Although the bishops' concerns—the spread of Protestantism, communism, and secularism—seemed defensive, they were also beginning to recognize the social problems of the continent.

Critics and New Questions

How could a theology of liberation arise from a church so historically conservative? The answer is to be found in the experience of crisis in Latin American societies starting in the 1960s and the impact of Vatican Council II and its aftermath on the Catholic church. Indeed, in Latin America, events in the church and in society as a whole are intertwined. In the 1960s new questions about the social order urgently demanded new answers, and church people felt a new freedom to respond.

Consider the situation of the typical rural parish priest. He might have twenty thousand or more parishioners living in villages scattered through the hills or fields around the main town. Most would be baptized and consider themselves Catholics, but the priest could get to their villages only at intervals of several weeks, and then his contact would be primarily for ritual events, such as the mass, baptism, or marriage. In such circumstances he could scarcely have any meaningful communication with people, let alone engage in any relevant teaching of Christianity. With the kind of theology that he had learned in the seminary, he might believe that in some mysterious way God was using his sacramental action to save people. However, the more optimistic kind of theology that was then gaining ground—that God's salvation reaches people everywhere, whether or not they are good Catholics—could not but raise questions about the significance of his own life and activity as a priest.

If he looked more closely, he could have another reason for doubts. Since he lived on the money he collected from the people, the peasants might see him as not too different from the government officials, store owners, and loan sharks in the town. His own standard of living might be modest, but it came from contributions of the poor. Institutionally, moreover, the church was disproportionately serving the privileged, since priests and sisters were concentrated in the larger cities, often in Catholic schools for the rich. To the extent he began to be socially conscious, such a priest became aware of the church's complicity with an unjust social order.

Many priests and sisters working at the local level began to raise questions about their activity. Certain political events, such as the Cuban revolution and the experience of Brazil in the early 1960s, began to raise institutional questions.

The Cuban experience was significant for what did not happen. Christians as such played no important role in the overthrow of the Batista dictatorship, and the church soon became the refuge for those Cubans who resented the implementation of revolutionary changes. Some bishops and many priests left the country, further weakening a church already institutionally
feeble. The Cuban government and Communist Party took an officially atheist line. Virtually no one in the church seems to have posed in theological and pastoral terms the possibility that Christians could take a positive attitude toward the revolution. (Only in the late 1960s did some Cuban bishops begin to move toward a positive assessment of the revolution.)

Inspired by Cuba's example, rural guerrilla movements arose in Venezuela, Guatemala, Peru, and a number of other countries. In response, the Kennedy administration launched the Alliance for Progress, which combined development aid with an upgrading of armies and police to meet the threat of insurgency. A shared anxiety about revolution tended to unite church people, Christian Democratic parties, and foreign aid agencies.

What Brazilians experienced and the questions they raised in the late 1950s and early 1960s foreshadowed what was to happen in the rest of the continent. Under President Juscelino Kubitschek (1955–60), the government sought to give an impulse to economic development. The president himself used Christian language, calling social injustice, for example, "a great sin against Christ." Becoming critical of the landholding oligarchy, the Catholic hierarchy formed an alliance with the government that led to the creation of a large development agency for the rural Northeast. Nevertheless, the government acted in the technocratic top-down manner that would later receive the pejorative name "developmentalism."

On the other hand, peasant leagues were becoming militant, and radicalized middle-class people, particularly university stu-

ning to discuss such topics with Dominican priests and Catholic intellectuals.

All this ferment led to a crisis for the church. In the prevailing view of things, the church could train people and could promote "social action," including development projects, but had no role in the realm of politics proper. This theoretically clear notion was proving increasingly unsatisfactory in practice. To the extent it became undeniable that the causes of poverty were structural and would require basic structural changes, it seemed obvious that such changes would come about only through political action. It was inconsistent to call for structural change but refuse to become politically involved. This question came up in several contexts, most notably in the movement called Ação Popular, which grew out of Catholic Action. Discussion was cut short, however, when the armed forces became alarmed by the growing grass-roots militancy and staged a coup in March 1964. Many intellectuals, politicians, and popular leaders had to flee the country, and the church was largely silenced for almost a decade.

Vatican II

In the 1950s it would have been as difficult for Catholics to
dig in its heels and reaffirm most of the very elements the reformers were criticizing. During the following centuries the Catholic church mistrusted science and all aspects of the modern world. Nineteenth-century popes, for example, condemned the very idea of democracy. The function of theology was not to raise new questions but to defend the Roman Catholic system. In the crisis that followed World War II European theologians began to pursue new questions with scriptural and historical studies and in dialogue with existentialism only to be stopped by Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Humani Generis* (1950).

For centuries church authorities had been piling sandbags higher and higher to withstand the rising waters of modernity. With Vatican II the dam broke.

In early 1959 John XXIII, whom many had expected to be a caretaker pope, called for the first council since Vatican Council I (1869-70), which had defined papal infallibility. In the opening days of the council in the fall of 1962, a group of European bishops thwarted efforts at control by Vatican officials and established an open atmosphere. In the council's plenary sessions and working groups, ideas and proposals that had been cautiously advanced only in progressive theological circles were legitimized. The first complete document, the decree on worship (1963), ended the Latin mass that had been the norm for fifteen centuries.

With Vatican II the Catholic church, as it were, turned itself inside out. Prior to the council Catholics were taught that their main business in life was to remain in the “state of grace” and get to heaven. The church was the custodian of the means of grace and truth. In such a scheme earthly matters were ultimately inconsequential. At Vatican II, accepting and building on decades of work by theologians, the Catholic church modestly accepted its “pilgrim” status, journeying alongside the rest of humankind. In a further radical shift the church began to see in “human progress” evidence of God’s working in human history.

European and North American bishops and theologians set the agenda for Vatican II. Latin American bishops had only a modest role, as when they and other Third World bishops insisted that the document on the church in the modern world should deal with the issue of development. Priests, sisters, and lay activists in Latin America welcomed the initial results of the council, such as the shift to the vernacular language and the general liberalizing tone.

Far more important than any of its particular decisions was the fact that the council led Latin American Catholics to take a much more critical look at their own church and their own society. Not only did they seek to adopt the council to Latin America—they began to ask Latin American questions.

Camilo Torres: The Price of Commitment

When Vatican II closed in December 1965, Father Camilo Torres had already joined the Colombian guerrillas and would soon die in combat. Although very few church people joined guerrilla movements, many underwent a similar radicalization process. Torres' consistency in moving from words to action made him a kind of instant icon. He intuitively anticipated much of what was to become liberation theology.

Born into an upper-class Bogotá family, Torres studied theology and sociology in Belgium during the 1950s, and then returned to his country to work as a sociologist and university chaplain. In the early 1960s he did research in Colombia, producing studies on issues like urbanization, living standards, land reform, political violence, education, democracy, and the practice of sociology itself. Gradually, he moved away from academic sociology and into doing training courses with peasants around the country. Concluding that conventional politics, with its oligarchically controlled parties, could not bring significant change, he began to propose something that seemed eminently logical, the formation of a broadly based United Front that
would link together peasants, workers, slum dwellers, professional people, and others to pressure for basic change. His good looks and earnestness and the fact that he was a priest—in the most “Catholic” country in Latin America—made him an exciting new kind of public figure. Torres spoke openly of the need for revolution, defining it as a “fundamental change in economic, social and political structures.” Power had to be taken away from the privileged and given to the poor majorities—that was the essence of revolution. It could be peaceful if the privileged elites did not put up violent resistance. In language that echoed the gospels Torres said that revolution was

the way to bring about a government that feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, teaches the ignorant, puts into practice the works of charity, and love for neighbor, not just every now and then, and not just for a few, but for the majority of our neighbors.

Christians had to become involved in revolution, since that was the only effective way to “make love for everyone a reality.”

In May 1965 the United Front platform, based largely on a draft by Torres, became public. Rushing around Colombia to address crowds, Torres expressed his thinking in a series of manifestolike “messages” to different audiences: Christians, Communists, military men, trade unionists, students, peasants, and women (for a Latin American male in 1965 he had a rather clear and critical vision). Yet even as he strove to build a nationwide political movement, Torres was developing contacts with the ELN (Army of National Liberation) guerrillas. Pressured by Cardinal Luis Concha of Bogotá, he accepted laicization, although he continued to regard what he was doing as an outgrowth of his priestly calling.

The army had already detected Torres’ ELN ties when he received the order to drop his political work and join the guerrillas. His short fighting career ended on February 15, 1966, when he was killed in combat.

On a conceptual level Torres’ theology remained largely what he had learned in Louvain, and his sociology had only hints of what would soon become the “dependence theory.” Yet in his movement from theory to practice, from analysis to involvement—to the point of sacrificing his life—and in the way he focused Christianity on effective love for neighbor, he became a paradigmatic figure for many Christians.

This does not mean that many priests rushed to join the guerrillas; only a handful have done so during the past twenty years. What struck the consciences of many Christians was Torres’ willingness to follow his convictions to their ultimate consequences.

Declaring Intellectual Independence

Revolution was in the air in the mid-1960s. Even President Eduardo Frei called his Christian Democratic program in Chile a “Revolution in Liberty.” The implication was that he could bring about changes in Chilean society without sacrificing “liberty.” Cuba was of course the unmentioned term of comparison.

Latin American social scientists were beginning to question the possibility of genuine development within the present world order. Their ideas were popularized as the “dependence theory.” Conventional ideas of development diagnosed underdevelopment as “backwardness,” and assumed that development could be achieved by following the path already traced out by the “advanced” countries. After examining their own history, however, Latin Americans were concluding that all their development—from conquest to the present—had been the result of events in Europe, and later in North America. Their whole history could be written around successive exports (gold and silver, dyes, hides, rubber, coffee, and so forth) exploited by the centers of world production and their local allies, the landholding classes. Their twentieth-century industry was not their
own but that of giant foreign corporations. Underdevelopment was structural. The most apt terms were not "advanced" and "backward" but "dominant" and "dependent." Striving to "catch up" would be in vain; their only hope was to break the chains of dependence (see Chapters Five and Twelve for further discussion of Latin American social theory).

Whatever its merits, dependence theory was more than a new idea—it was a new paradigm applicable not only in economics but in the social and human sciences generally. In its original form it was developed largely by Latin Americans as a kind of declaration of cultural and intellectual independence. It is worth noting that the 1960s also saw the emergence of a generation of superb Latin American novelists, such as Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, and Mario Vargas Llosa. The new pastoral and theological approaches took form at a moment when Latin America was affirming its own identity.

Vatican II encouraged church people to enter into dialogue with "the world." Viewed optimistically from Europe, that world seemed to be one of rapid technological and social change. A Third World angle of vision, however, revealed a world of vast poverty and oppression that seemed to call for revolution. Several documents in the postcouncil period reinforced that impression.

One key document was Pope Paul VI's 1967 encyclical Populorum Progressio (On the Progress of Peoples). Contrary to his predecessors, whose documents on Catholic "social teaching" reflected European preoccupations, Paul VI focused on Third World development issues. Within its generally moderate tone the encyclical hinted at a strong critique of the existing international economic order. The Wall Street Journal called it "warmed-over Marxism." Nevertheless, the pope seemed to assume that development would be achieved through consensus rather than struggle. In Latin America the most quoted passage was paragraph 31:

We know... that a revolutionary uprising—save where there is manifest long-standing tyranny which would do great damage to fundamental personal rights and dangerous harm to the com-

mon good of the country—produces new injustices, throws more elements out of balance and brings on new disasters.

Shortly afterward, a group of eighteen Third World bishops, half from Brazil, drew up a statement that went considerably further than the pope's, while quoting him abundantly. They took a positive view of revolution and approvingly quoted the statement of a bishop during Vatican II: "Authentic socialism is Christianity lived to the full, in basic equality and with a fair distribution of goods."

In Argentina a group of priests in turn used this statement of the “Bishops of the Third World” as its own starting point and called itself the Movement of Priests for the Third World. Similar priest groups sprang up in Peru, Colombia, Mexico, and elsewhere. They became the most ardent articulators of a new sense of crisis, possibly because they had to deal with the disparity between the new ideals emerging from the council and the everyday reality they experienced. In a flurry of manifestos such groups raised questions about the role of the church. Did Catholicism reinforce fatalism, acting as an "opiate"? Should the church sell its properties? Should not priests give up their privileges and live like ordinary people? They also critiqued existing society. Implicitly responding to the pope's warning against violence, one document pointed to a "centuries-old pattern of violence that has been produced by the existing economic, political, social and cultural power structures." Sisters were also beginning to question traditional kinds of work, such as teaching in private schools, and to move toward pastoral work with the poor, but they did not take public stands.

By no means did all, or even a majority, of priests and sisters become radicalized. At its height the Third World Movement included eight hundred of Argentina's five thousand priests as its members, and the proportion in other countries was no doubt less. Nevertheless, this radicalized clergy played a role out of proportion to its numbers, particularly since they were in more direct contact with poor sectors of the population, while much of the rest of the clergy was working in schools.
Throughout this period Protestant pastors and theologians were raising similar questions.

Medellín—the Magna Carta

In August 1968 about 130 Catholic bishops (representing more than 600 in Latin America) met in Medellín, Colombia, for the task of applying Vatican II to Latin America. It was the high-water mark of worldwide upheaval of the 1960s. Students had occupied universities throughout the United States, and Chicago police had beaten protestors at the Democratic convention; striking factory workers had linked up with students in the Paris May, momentarily seeming to threaten the prevailing order; the Soviet Union had invaded Czechoslovakia and ended the “Prague spring”; Mexican police had fired on demonstrators at the Plaza of Tlatelolco, killing an estimated four hundred. Pope Paul VI’s 1967 reaffirmation of the church’s ban on contraception, contrary to the recommendation of an expert commission he himself had appointed, had accelerated a growing authority crisis within the Catholic church itself.

The Medellín meeting was the second plenary meeting of CELAM (Latin American Bishops’ Conference); the first had been held in Rio de Janeiro in 1955. In preparation for the meeting the CELAM staff had circulated among the bishops a preparatory document that surveyed economic conditions, living standards, the cultural situation, and political life in terms not very different from some of the manifestos mentioned above. It then went on to consider the presence of the church in society, and closed with several pages of theological reflection.

That procedure itself—to start with observations on society and then take up the church—was a break from the traditional from-doctrine-to-application mode which insinuates that truth comes down to earth from above. In their discussions and the documents they produced, the bishops first assessed the overall situation and only then moved to brief theological reflections, and finally urged pastoral commitments. This three-part structure was apparent not only in each individual document but in the structure of the published conclusions. The more secular topics (justice, peace, education, family, youth) preceded the more church-related ones (pastoral work, priests, religious, lay people, church structures, and so forth).

In ringing phrases the bishops called for Christians to be involved in the transformation of society. They denounced “institutionalized violence” and referred to it as a “situation of sin” (thus expanding the traditional notion of sin focused on individual transgressions of a divine law); they called for “sweeping, bold, urgent, and profoundly renovating changes”; they described education as a process that could enable people “to become agents of their own advancement.” At one point the bishops compared three types of mind-sets. “Revolutionaries” were described more favorably than “traditionalists” or “developmentalists” (who were viewed as technocrats). Revolutionaries were defined as those seeking radical change and who believed that the people should chart their own course—not as those using violence. Pastorally, the bishops spelled out a number of commitments, such as defending human rights and carrying out a “consciousness-raising evangelization.” They committed the church to share the condition of the poor out of solidarity. In several places the documents spoke of comunidades de base, “base communities,” a term that had recently been coined to denote small, lay-led groups of Christians. Few such communities existed then, but they would soon become very widespread.

The bishops frequently used “liberation” and similar terms, and they explicitly likened “genuine development,” the “transition from less human to more human conditions for each and every person” to the biblical exodus.

The Medellín documents also left a good deal of ambiguity. The terminologies of development and liberation were inter-
twinned, and the underlying assumption seemed to be that basic change could come through a conversion on the part of the privileged and powerful. There was no strong endorsement of the right of the oppressed to struggle for their rights, perhaps because the bishops feared they would be interpreted as endorsing violence. That the documents were as strong as they were reflected the input of a minority of bishops and a solid group of a hundred expert advisors, who undoubtedly did most of the drafting.

Priests, sisters, and lay activists eagerly seized the Medellín documents as a Magna Carta justifying a whole new pastoral approach.

Liberation Theology—First Maps

One of the advisors at Medellín was the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, whose hand can be seen especially in the document on poverty in the church. A few weeks before the bishops' meeting Gutiérrez outlined a "theology of liberation" in a talk in the coastal fishing port of Chimbote, Peru. That occasion may mark the first use of the expression in Latin America. In subsequent papers and talks Gutiérrez developed his ideas. During 1970 there was an explosion of conferences on the topic. In 1971 Gutiérrez and Hugo Assmann, a Brazilian, published full-length books on liberation theology that mapped the terrain of the emerging questions. While Gutiérrez' framework was primarily that of the Scriptures and modern theology, Assmann emphasized that what was developing was a new method of theology. In a similar vein the Argentine Enrique Dussel suggested a new way of reading Latin American church history and proposed philosophical categories appropriate to a situation of oppression.

Traditional Catholic theology had served to train priests in the seminary. It was in effect a defense of traditional Catholic doctrine against the onslaughts of Protestantism, the Enlightenment, and modernity in general. During the twentieth century Catholic theology slowly moved toward the university and began to adopt the critical methods of modern scholarship. Protestant theology was already more at home in the university.

Even in the early 1960s both Protestants and Catholics had intuitions of what would become a specific Latin American theology. Nevertheless, only late in the decade did they make a conscious break from the European matrix. It was the pressure of events, and especially the move from social to expressly political involvement mentioned above, that raised new questions. Theologians began to consciously take Latin America as their context for raising questions. As they realized that their theology was emerging out of a particular context, they began to see that the same thing was true of any theology—including the theology they had learned in Europe. What they had once taken to be simply theology—seemingly "universal"—they now began to see as a "North Atlantic" theology, a theology of the rich world. This was true not only of traditional theology but of the work of progressive Vatican II theologians like Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Hans Küng. A Uruguayan layman, Alberto Methol Ferre, articulated this new consciousness in a polemic essay entitled "Church and Opulent Society" (1969).

Latin American theologians found that they were not only dealing with different issues but that their method, the very way they engaged in theology, was different. Since the Enlightenment the major challenge for Christianity in the West has been its credibility: how can modern people believe in ancient stories about the seas parting before Moses' wand, or about Jesus multiplying loaves and fishes or rising from the dead? Theologians have responded first by using historical and textual scholarship to sort out various layers of meaning, literary forms, myths and legends, in the Scripture, and then by finding points of contact or correlation in modern culture, points at which people can actually hear a message of salvation.
While Latin Americans can understand such questions, their basic concerns are different. Their question is not so much whether one can believe what Christianity affirms, but rather what relevance Christianity has in the struggle for a more just world. Gutiérrez defines theology as “critical reflection on praxis in the light of the word of God.” It is a critique of how social structures treat the poor and how Christians and the church itself operate.

Yet liberation theology is not primarily an ethics. It is not a systematic exposition of principles on how people should act; rather it is an exploration of the theological meaning of such activity. Thus, for instance, Gutiérrez and other theologians accept the dependency critique advanced by social scientists. However, they go on to point out the biblical and theological resonances of the term “liberation.” God is encountered in the people’s struggle for liberation. Similarly, their concern is not to lay down specific rules for how to struggle for justice. They stress that a responsible commitment within class conflict is an expression of love for neighbor. They are not “fomenting” hatred, as critics contend; class conflict already exists. Through solidarity in struggle with the poor, class division must be transcended in a new type of society.

Early essays in liberation theology paid special attention to the church. In contrast to a strong anti-authority and anti-institution spirit that characterized the later 1960s elsewhere, Latin American Catholic theologians did not question the Roman Catholic church’s fundamental hierarchical structure, although they pointed to the need for conversion. Some asked, for example, whether the Eucharist celebrated in a wealthy congregation might seem to endorse extravagant consumption that reduced others to inhuman poverty. In raising such questions theologians were not arguing that masses should be canceled but that the church should examine its presence in society and be prepared to make changes.

The initial sketches of liberation theology anticipated most of the major issues that would develop later. Church workers and active lay people now had a rationale for new options.

---

Christians for Socialism

Like Brazil earlier and Central America later, Chile was at the center of the Latin American stage in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Popular Unity leftist coalition won national elections and under President Salvador Allende sought to carry out significant reforms. Other Latin Americans paid close attention. If socialism could come gradually and peacefully to Chile, it could be a sign of hope for others.

Chilean politics were atypical for Latin America. Democratic institutions seemed firmly established, labor unions were strong, and political parties embodied clear-cut competing ideologies. Many became disillusioned with the Christian Democrats’ “Revolution in Liberty,” especially after harsh repression of strikers in 1967. Critics claimed that Christian Democracy was not a “third way” between capitalism and communism, but simply reformist capitalism, incapable of solving Chile’s problems. Significant groups of Christians joined left-wing parties and movements. The Allende coalition victory in 1970 signaled a growing leftward shift.

The advent of a socialist government raised new questions for Christians. The Christians for Socialism movement advocated direct political involvement. Its members believed Christians should accept the basic “rationality” of socialism, although they did not endorse any particular political group. Some were former Christian Democrats who had become radicalized and formed groups like MAPU (United Popular Action Movement) or the Christian Left; many joined MIR (Movement of the Revolutionary Left), which advocated going beyond electoral processes; some joined the Socialist Party; very few, however, became Communists. These Christians called for a new kind of pastoral presence within the move toward socialism. They insisted that since much of the worldview and ideology that had been preached and taught as Christianity hindered people
from accepting socialism, Christians had a particular responsibility to free people of such ideological blockages.

In April 1982 some four hundred people converged in Santiago for an international conference of Christians for Socialism (despite the opposition of the Chilean bishops). Assmann, Gutiérrez, and a number of the liberation theologians were present. The conference's final document inevitably reflected the Chilean situation, for example, in its frequent denunciation of tercerismo ("third-wayism," i.e., Christian Democracy). The terminology is clearly Marxist, with frequent references to "relations of production, capitalist appropriation of surplus value, class struggle, ideological struggle," and so forth.

The conference called on Christians to engage in ideological struggle by identifying and "unmasking" the manipulation of Christianity to justify capitalism. However, this does not mean "instrumentalizing the faith for other political ends, but rather restoring to it its original evangelical dimension." (This question continues to recur: how is Christian involvement with the left different from the time-honored support the church has provided the conservative status quo?)

The document stated that Christians were discovering "the convergence between the radical nature of their faith and their political commitment." There was a "fertile interaction" between faith and revolutionary practice. Revolutionary practice was said to be "the generating matrix of a new theological creativity." Theology thus became "critical reflection within and about liberating praxis as part of a permanent confrontation with the demands of the Gospel."

The document closed with a line from Che Guevara that had been displayed on banners and signs during the meeting itself: "When Christians dare to give full-fledged revolutionary witness, then the Latin American revolution will be invincible...."

2. GOING TO THE POOR

Joelmir Betting, a Brazilian journalist, calls his country a "Belindia"—a Belgium plus an India. Thirty-two million people enjoy a standard of living like that of Belgium, a working class of around thirty million just gets by, and the remaining seventy million live in conditions of hunger, disease, and unemployment like those in India. He says they are "political prisoners of the system."

This fact of widespread poverty is the starting point for liberation theology.

In mid-1985 I was with a Witness for Peace delegation in an area of Nicaragua where peasants had been resettled away from a battle zone. The government had erected twenty-by-twenty-foot house frames, and each family had finished the walls and put up partitions. Most of the people in the community had not only never been to Managua, but had not been as far as
public stage, both in Latin America and outside it—in the United States and Europe. There will be a public conflict over competing theologies whether they are called by that name or not. Such controversy is likely to continue as long as the underlying crises remain unresolved.

REFERENCES

CHAPTER I—BIRTH PANGS: EMERGENCE OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY


On Camilo Torres see Walter J. Broderick, *Camilo Torres: A Biography of the Priest-Guerrillero* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday,


**CHAPTER 2—GOING TO THE POOR**


Freire presents his ideas most systematically in *Pedagogy of the Op-