Cristian BUCHIU

Colonialism and Disparities: The Birth of Liberation Theology

Having preserved the class structure of the Spanish and Portuguese metropolis, South American societies never developed representative assemblies like their counterparts in the North, but maintained the hierarchical structures of power of the conquista even after the revolutions of the XIXth century. Indigenous people were forced into slavery even after conversion, and they endured hideous atrocities. The attempts of Roman Catholic leaders to salvage the Native Americans are usually known and the cases of Antonio DE MONTESTINOS and Bartolomé DE LAS CASAS are quoted to show the early Church efforts to consider the Amerindians as human beings.

Economic growth combined with sharp class distinction and the patronatus system (the consequences of the latter meant that the State acted as a brake on the ability of the Church to change society) have always been among the important causes of a hugely unequal distribution of wealth in South America. On the other hand, societies may live well even with such discrepancies if the financially less well-off classes receive a fair amount of the wealth in order to cover, for example, basic cost of living and education expenses. This was not however the case in most of the South American countries at the beginning of the XXth century.

DOCTRINAL BIRTH

The poverty of the lowest social classes was so striking that it permanently provoked strong reactions. Social movements and armed guerrillas agitating for revolutions flourished during the XXth century, greatly inspired by the practical achievements of communism in the Soviet Union (also by its financial support), and by the Marxist ideology highly esteemed in South America.

The South American romantic momentum of social revolution is described by such successful leaders as the Cuban president Fidel CASTRO or idealised in popular heroes like Che GUEVARA or fr. Camillo TORRES, killed while fighting for changing their countries' systems.

Liberation theology was coined in such a context of poverty, social struggle and inequality, where quixotic outlaws exercised an enchanting romantic appeal. It may be that early liberation theologians felt they were fighting a romantic battle, but of course, other, less poetic, factors were also responsible for the development of the movement.

Scholars like Arthur F. F. MCGOVERN take into account the significant changes in the Roman Catholic Church of Latin America began long before Vatican II, as concerns grew about the deficit of priests, the numerous conversions to Protestantism and the influence of Marxism.

The shortage of priests led to a higher degree of involvement by laity in the Church life: "The training of lay coordinators, Cursillo retreats, Roman Catholic action groups modelled after the Young Christian Workers in Europe, the Better World movement brought over from Italy, and a plan for radio teaching of religion, all formed part of revitalized efforts to reach more of the faithful and to involve them more actively. These efforts laid the groundwork for the 'base communities' that would become prominent in the years following."

The intellectual context for the development of liberation theology was basically described by the European theologians' interests, synthesized by the BOFF brothers — "The integral humanism of Jacques MARITAIN and the social personalism of MOUNIER, the progressive evolutionism of Teilhard DE CHARDIN, Henri DE LUBAC's reflections on the social dimensions of dogma, Yves CONGAR's theology of the laity and the work of M.-D. CHENU and the Second Vatican Council."

SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

The Second Vatican Council from 1962–1965 offered new ground for a more practical involvement in the world theology and directly supported the basic ideas of the latter liberation theology, especially the possibility of "transforming the world."

The encyclical *Gaudium et Spes* focused on the church dealing with the modern world, including social inequities. The discourse of the Roman Catholic Church was concentrated on social and political activism.

The emphasis on social activism is the most important factor in the birth of South American liberation theology, together with the emphasis on laity involvement in the Church. The activism was founded on a series of developments of the Roman Catholic magisterium and a new reinterpretation of the biblical *charity*.

In *Mater et Magistra* (1961), John XXIII expanded the traditional concern of the Church for the worker to include treatment of poor nations and uses for the first time the term *development*. John XXIII deals with the term in *Pacem in Terris* (1963) and inserts also a significant treatment of socio-economic rights (the right to food, employment, education and medical care).

In Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967), development is enriched with the term *integral* and the main focus is on trade relations between rich and poor nations, which are suspected of creating dependency and inequality.

Extremely explicit, this political analysis by the papal office is a paramount detail that explains the background of liberation theology and the reasons why it did not develop in any fortuitous niche of Roman Catholic doctrine, but more par-

ticularly in a context of intense discussion and research on the meaning of development, and generally in the context of defining a suitable social doctrine, relevant for contemporary capitalist societies.

Paul E. SIGMUND was thus right to notice that "by the time of 1968 the issue of the moral validity of the economic and political system in Latin America was squarely before the Church. Marxist criticisms of capitalism and the 'dependence' of which the pope spoke were being analyzed by social scientists in Latin America. The question of the legitimacy of revolutionary violence, the abuses of capitalism, and the appropriate response to poverty and oppression had to be faced ..."

The Vatican endorsed and condemned at the same time the revolution in *Populorum Progressio*: "We know, however, that a revolutionary uprising — save where is manifest long-standing tyranny which would do great damage to fundamental personal rights and dangerous harm to the common good of the country — produces new injustices, and brings on new disasters. A real evil should not be fought against at the cost of greater misery."

HISTORICAL OUTLINE

The precise and particular context of the birth of liberation theology was, according to SIGMUND, "1968 — the year of the Medellín Bishops conference — which was also the year of the Prague Spring, student quasi-revolutions in Paris and Mexico City, the siege of the Chicago Democratic Convention, the emergence of the New Left and Black Power movements, and takeovers of Columbia and other universities in the United States, Europe and Latin America."

Important factors catalysing the emergence of liberation theology were the main Christian social organizations appearing at the beginning of the sixties as precursors of the later socially-involved liberation movements we mentioned previously, mainly youth groups that promoted advancements of living conditions for the people: the Student Christian Movement, Young Christian Workers, Young Christian Agriculturalists or the Movement for Basic Education.

All these groups of Christian affiliation were particular expressions of a need of the marginalized people and they came to fill up the theologically empty space of a church that was described emphatically by Gustavo GUTIERREZ:

"The Latin American Church has lived and to a large extent continues to live as a ghetto church. Individual Christians, small communities and the Church as a whole are becoming more politically aware and are beginning to read *politically* the signs of the times in Latin America."

In fact, the birth of the South American liberation theology and the existence of these movements are highly interdependent. One cannot understand the development of one without the other. The organization of the first base community in Brazil occurred about 1963. The formation of the aforementioned movements, broadly called Catholic Action, was inspired by Canon Joséph CARDIJN in Belgium.

This boom of lay organizations would probably not have happened without national reorganizations of churches. One example for this is the formation in 1952, in Brazil, of the National Conference of Bishops.

In the context of these movements, in which young theologians were coming of age, the main themes of later liberation theology were discussed for the first time. The terminology used in the Vatican magisterium's documents was adopted, discussed, researched and given a practical shape by a generation already grown up in the enthusiasm of personal, practical involvement.

This enthusiasm itself in turn fed on the obnoxious economic and social conditions of the time. It is to be noticed that the majority of the names involved with liberation theology were only reaching maturity in the 50's and 60's.

This particular generation, which was experiencing the stagnation of their countries, was convinced that something new had to be started. This explains the initial lively interest in social involvement.

Liberation theology was the problem of this particular generation of theologians, yet nowadays, especially with the fall of communism, it may be affirmed that it is fading along with its founders.

STAGES OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

The BOFFS talk about four stages in the history of liberation theology. The *foundational* stage is dominated by the Roman Catholics Gustavo GUTIERREZ and Juan Luis SEGUNDO, and by the Protestants Emilio CASTRO and José Miguez BONINO. Conferences and seminars, series of articles, reviews and journals describe broadly this stage.

The main event of this stage was a somewhat pre-liberation theology meeting, the Medellín Conference of South American bishops in 1968. In preparation for this conference, GUTIERREZ "described theology as critical reflection on praxis" during one of the many preparatory meetings.

These meetings, claim the BOFFS, "acted as laboratories for a theology worked out on the basis of pastoral concerns and committed Christian action." One of these was a Swiss congress organized in Cartigny in 1969 under the title *Toward a Theology of Liberation*. The first Roman Catholic congresses on liberation theology were organized in Bogotá, Columbia, in 1970 and 1971.

The *building* stage, described as "responding to the most urgent needs in the life of the Church: spirituality, Christology, and ecclesiology," is actually a period of intense publishing on the topic, the bibliography growing rapidly in all South American countries and trying to cover the widest possible range of subjects.

The *settling-in* stage involved the establishment of direct practical involvement: "More theologians became pastors, too; it became usual to see theologians taking part in involved epistemological discussions in learned congresses, then leaving go back to their bases among the people to become involved in matters of catechesis, trade union politics, and community organization."

The *formalisation* stage surrounds the attempt to find more "formal expression" to present in a significant way the "whole basis of revelation and tradition so as to bring out the social and liberating dimensions". But one of the major achievements was the commencement in 1985 of the publication of a series of 55 volumes under the title *Theology and Liberation*.

LIBERATION THEOLOGY TODAY

Liberation theology has lost the fervour of its beginnings and its early revolutionary zeal. It is also hard to assess what it has gained but the main emphasis moved from the

traditional analysis of class struggle to a new sort of solidarity with the poor and oppressed. Liberation theology has reached a certain maturity. MCGOVERN affirms that liberation theology "has matured sufficiently to include greater internal self-criticism."

One of the most interesting changes is the shift in the usage of Marxism. Liberation theologians used elements of Marxist analysis, as it offered the best method of criticizing the capitalist system that was producing the dependency of South America — hence its poverty and economic problems.

In liberation theology "praxis" means the actual living of Christian faith; "class struggle" implies the social realities of Latin America, not a programme of a revolutionary elimination of the ruling class; and when talking about the "poor", theologians of liberation are thinking of landless peasants and those obstructed from real political and economical participation. But there is a repeated identification of capitalism as the source of Latin America's problems.

One positive factor is that liberation theology can still exert a radical "prophetic" role in reminding complacent elites of the religious obligation of social solidarity and in combating oppression and promoting the empowerment of the poor.

SIGMUND notices that "it took the official Roman Catholic Church a century and a half to recognize that democracy and freedom were central elements in the Christian message. It has taken only two decades for it to relate that message to human liberation."

In order to better envision the future ideological perspectives and choices of liberation theology, in the conclusion of his book SIGMUND asks several poignant questions worth reproducing here:

"Does theological reflection on the experience of the poor and oppressed always lead to the conclusion that capitalism must be replaced by a socialist system? What is the relation of the private property and liberation? How can human rights be best promoted in the modern state? What is the liberation theology's attitude toward the redemocratization of Latin America? What is the 'prophetic' role of the theologian?

If the cure for the weaknesses and failures of democracy is more democracy, should not the liberation theologians devote their primary energies to developing the spirituality of socially concerned democracy, whether capitalist or socialist in its economic form, rather than denouncing dependency, imperialism and capitalist exploitation?"

Suggested Reading

BONINO José Miguez, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*. Philadelphia, 1975.
BOFF Leonardo and Clodovis, *Introducing Liberation Theology*. NY, 1987.
GUTIERREZ Gustavo, *A Theology of Liberation*. NY, 1973.
MCGOVERN Arthur F. F., *Liberation Theology and Its Critics*. NY, 1989.
SEGUNDO Juan Luis, *Liberación de la teología*. Buenos Aires, 1975.
SIGMUND Paul E., *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads*. NY, 1990.

Cristian BUCHIU is an assistant professor at Hyperion Univ. - Bucharest, in history and religion. He holds a Master of Theology at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary in New York & a Master in Political Sciences at the Univ. of Bucharest. He also has a B.A. in Orthodox Theology in Bucharest. His email address is cbuchiu@rdslink.ro.

Pablo ROMO CEDANO

Liberation Theologies and Current Challenges

We frequently have the idea that liberation theology is an ideology that rules thought within a generalised sector of the Christian Church in Latin America, and that is false. Liberation theology defines itself as one faith reflection starting from the liberation experience of the believers (Christian militants). That is, doing theology is a second act, the first being the Christian life that works for building God's Reign. It fights for freedom, justice and truth.

NOSTALGIC? A LITTLE HISTORY

It might seem that today it is not relevant to speak of a liberation theology, especially after the official sentences in the eighties, the changes in the world's ideological signs, the rise of new actors, the manifest expansion of neoliberalism and the new global trends.

It might eventually seem that this is not a fashionable subject — as if freedom is something fashionable. Apparently, speaking about liberation theologies today is like speaking of the glorious sixties, a nostalgic experience for some who have become conservative and wistful. Is this true?

What happened with the liberation theologies? Where is the theological reflection today? Is this theological model still valid in a world transformed by the expansion of capitalism? Are the poor still a theological subject?

Liberation theology was born as a *concrete expression* in the sixties and was systematised in its first moments both by Latin American and European theologians. Gustavo GUTIERREZ OP was the first to coin this expression as a theological model in the early seventies.

Liberation theology initialised its first stages by recovering the experience of the Christians in Latin America involved in the various battles of social, political and economic change.

Liberation theology is the consequence, or better said, the fruit in Latin America of the Second Vatican Council for the Roman Catholics and of a theological update for Protestants who lived and suffered in the sixties.

If the reflective ecclesiastic experience of this council affected the whole Roman Catholic Church, the manifestations would be very different in the various concrete realities of the world as a whole.

In Europe, there have been reflections for many years upon the dissociation between "Christian life" and "life in the world"; hence there appeared theologies called in their times "theologies of the world's realities" by Yves CONGAR OP.

These theologies, the majority elaborated in France, were fundamentally optimistic, modern, liberal, and bound together with experiences of concrete Christian life in this world. We must remember both the experiences of worker priests and nuns and of priests and nuns in the universities.

Alongside these theologies, there appeared other, more pessimistic ones like "the theology of the death of God." There were in this period more rationalist theologies and the hermeneutical and historical criticism manifested itself.

Those were the times, we must remember, of the great debates and sentences for Biblical interpretation with the tools of the semantics of that period, of linguistics and of the contributions of biblical theology (fundamentally Protestant).

Such contributions, together with the Christian practice of many women and men in the social field, awakened an irrepressible desire to read the Bible "one more time"; to do *proper and contextual readings*.

The concern of many Christians was the result of an intense *search for alternatives*, ways for the authentic life of faith. The great European wars ended and a lot of opportunities opened for the future.