

CHAPTER ONE

The Latin American Christ: From Conquest to Struggle

Methinks the Christ, as he sojourned westward, went to prison in Spain, while another who took his name embarked with the Spanish crusaders for the New World, a Christ who was not born in Bethlehem, but in North Africa. This Christ became naturalized in the Iberian colonies of America, while Mary's Son and Lord has been little else than a stranger and sojourner in these lands from Columbus' day to this.

—John Mackay¹

Every discussion of Jesus Christ in Latin America must take into account an inescapable contradiction. On the one hand, the history of Christian theology in Latin America is inextricably bound to its development and formation in the countries of the North Atlantic. The birth of Christianity in Latin America was itself essentially a product of the Spanish conquest of the continent which began in the sixteenth century and which was consolidated by means of the subsequent colonization of the culture by the church and the crown—“the great two-headed Spain of the faith and the *conquista*.”² Moreover, despite the achievement of relative political independence from Spain in the nineteenth century, Latin American countries soon became economically dependent on the ‘Christian nations’ of Britain and later the United States. As the continent’s resources increasingly became an integral part of the Northern economies, the somewhat sporadic state of colonialism shifted to the more regular, systematic control of neocolonialism.³ Though the church did lose a significant degree of socio-political power in the transition, it nonetheless generally acquiesced to the capitalistic ideology of accumulation or, alternatively, insisted that religion had no relevance within the material realm of economics and politics.

On the other hand, the Latin American approach to the theological task is quite distinct from that of the North Atlantic, primarily due to the nature of the subjects from whom challenges are posed. Gustavo Gutiérrez characterizes this difference quite profoundly:

A goodly part of contemporary [North Atlantic] theology seems to take its start from the challenge posed by the *nonbeliever*. The nonbeliever calls into question our *religious world*, demanding its thoroughgoing purification and revitalization. . . . In a continent like Latin America, however, the main challenge does not come from the nonbeliever, but from the *nonhuman*—i.e., the human being who is not recognized as such by the prevailing social order. . . . These nonhumans do not call into question our religious world so much as they call into question our *economic, social, political, and cultural world*.⁴

The individual's search for personal meaning and self-realization, therefore, does not motivate the theological endeavor in Latin America in the same manner. The center shifts to those whose right to be subjects of their own history has been taken away from them—the voiceless, a people of the underside.

Of course, the existence and, more tragically still, the prevalence of the “nonhuman” in Latin America did not come into being by mere accident, nor was it simply a product of the cruel fate of nature.⁵ That process of dehumanization was systematically carried out by foreign nations driven by unrelenting avarice and sanctified dreams of imperial expansion. What some have identified as the forward progress of history towards greater civilization and material comfort is thereby unmasked to be a limited, ‘first world’ ideology. “The progress is history’s suffering,” U.S. theologian Rebecca Chopp laments, “we are its origin, its destiny, its cause.”⁶

The Spanish Legacy

The exploitation of the Latin American people began with the arrival of the first Spaniards on its shores. Although *Cristobal* [translated literally, “Christ-bearer”] Columbus was clearly convinced that he was carrying out his mission of evangelization with the blessing of God, the extension of Spanish power and wealth were never far from his mind.⁷ Unfortunately, it was the might of the sword which was wielded to carry out both objectives.

The magnitude of the genocide committed by the Spanish conquistadors against the indigenous people of Latin America is staggering.

Historians estimate that when the first 'explorers' reached the Pacific hemisphere the combined population of the Aztecs, Mayas and Incas—the three major races of pre-Columban Latin America—numbered somewhere between 70 and 90 million people. Only a century and a half later that number had been reduced to approximately 3.5 million; the majority of the native inhabitants had been massacred, while some were taken back to Europe as slaves.⁸

Of course, the conquest of the Latin American continent and the Carribean did not take place without the active resistance of the indigenous tribes who struggled against the foreign domination of their land and culture. Countless millions lost their lives rather than acquiesce to the designs of Spanish rule. The story is told of Hatuey, the Indian chief of the Guahaba region—now known as Haiti—who fled with his people in canoes so that they would not be taken as slaves to work in mines and to cultivate fields which had once been their inheritance. Hiding in the caves and mountains of eastern Cuba, Hatuey pointed to a basket of gold and lamented: "This is the god of the Christians. For him they pursue us. For him our fathers and brothers have died." Shortly thereafter, Hatuey was captured and tied to the stake. Before setting him on fire, the Spanish priest offered Hatuey eternal salvation in heaven if only he would agree to be baptized. When Hatuey is told that all good Christians are in that heaven, he chooses hell and the fires proceed to burn the body of a man with a 'lost soul.'⁹

Bartolomé de Las Casas had been the owner of one of the sizable plantations upon which the Indians had been forced to work the fields as unpaid serfs. At the age of forty, however, he underwent a conversion experience which opened his eyes to the inhumane treatment which had been carried out against the land's indigenous population. He subsequently worked quite actively within and outside of the church in an attempt to stop the unrelenting conquest of their lands and their human dignity. Only ten years after the conquest of Peru by Francisco Pizarro's crusade, Las Casas—then a bishop in the church—returned to Spain and had this to say to King Charles I of the brutal repression exacted by the conquistadors:

Daily in the land of New Castile, atrocities are committed at which Christian humanity shudders to look upon. . . . Drunk with power, and utterly devoid of any sense of responsibility, the new lords of this plantation state only indulge their unbridled caprices. . . . I must say, this would become the Crescent far better than the spotless Cross.¹⁰

Sadly, Las Casas was one of only a few lonely voices of protest sounding within the halls of the Latin American church. For in reality, its ec-

clesiastical and doctrinal authority were issued from Spain and Rome by a Catholic church brandishing its power in a manner parallel to that of the imperial throne. For all intents and purposes the colonized society could be characterized as a theocracy; it was 'blessed' with a unified political and religious structure, ruled by Catholic teaching, and headed by a royalty imbued with sacred election.¹¹ Evidence of this intimate marriage between the church and the political structure is demonstrated by virtue of the fact that the Pope regularly granted to the Spanish kings the privilege of nominating bishops to ecclesiastical sees in Latin America! For centuries priests and bishops continued to travel over from the Old World to take on positions of leadership and teaching within the church.¹² Astonishingly, the crown also had the right to seize a portion of the tithes gathered by the Latin American church as a reimbursement for the heavy costs of 'winning' new converts by the sword.¹³

One of the primary functions of the national church, in return, was to baptize and justify the newly established social order as representative of the reign of Christ over creation. In essence, this 'natural order' of creation was a near copy of the feudal land system — marked by a minority of owners with extensive land holdings who had at their disposal a considerable number of serfs — which had been firmly established within Spain. The communal land system of the native, 'pagan' culture was condemned and largely destroyed, securing a class stratification which has continued to characterize Latin American society to the present day. Without a doubt, there were notable exceptions of resistance to these structures of conquest; for example, the work of the Jesuits to fashion Indian farming communities under the protection and seal of the church. Even these efforts, however, were quite regularly undermined by the collusion of the religious and political hierarchy which operated with impunity.

The popular Christology which took root — or perhaps better put, was imposed — in Latin America reflected a synthesis of this historical experience of domination together with the traditional Catholic understanding of dogma and revelation. Georges Casalis has demonstrated in his typology of Latin American Christologies that this amalgamation resulted in the formation of two primary categories of Christ figures.¹⁴ Though his typology does appropriately uncover the ideological motives behind the dominant Christologies of the traditional Latin American church, it does not tell the whole story of popular religiosity. As will be treated at more length in chapter Five, the poor have sustained subversive images of Jesus Christ within its culture which have served as a constant protest against the oppression under which they have been forced to suffer. Their existence underscores the fact that the social consciousness and religious sentiments of a dominated people is never completely

co-opted by a ruling class; though perhaps alienated from its own culture, the popular consciousness is never fully bereft of elements of resistance as well.

The first image in Casalis' typology reflects the experience of Latin America's victims: a "suffering Christ" who has been thoroughly defeated and humiliated. It relies on a portrayal of Jesus of Nazareth as one who remained passive in the midst of his suffering as an outright acceptance of his God-given destiny. The religious and political authorities of Latin America promoted the image of the suffering Jesus as one in whom the poor could understand the virtues of their condition and even provide it with transcendent meaning.¹⁵ More importantly, it reinforced the omnipresent message that their social world had been created in such a way as to preclude the possibility of meaningful change.

Given this background, it should be considered as no coincidence that the Latin American cult of popular piety has traditionally centered around the celebrations of Holy Thursday and Good Friday, while Easter is passed with significantly less fanfare. In many ways it marks the identification of the poor with a powerless Jesus:

What do these great [Holy Week] processions of millions of women, men, and children — largely miners and country folk — reveal to us? And why miners and country folk? Is it perchance that, behind all this, there lurks the conscious or unconscious acceptance of one's situation of impotence and powerlessness, of being subjugated and oppressed, of inhumanity?¹⁶

The other strand in Casalis' typology can be traced to the royal-theocratic image of Christ which made the trip to the New World with the conquistadors. Jesus is depicted as a celestial monarch who reigns after his death as the leader of an imperial, military kingdom. Here, it is his resurrection which takes center stage. The resurrection, however, is not understood in relation to the new life of a crucified Jesus; rather, this figure moves from the incarnation (birth) to the ascension without pausing even for a moment's glance at the mission and death of the Savior. This Christ came to be identified with the authorities who manifested effective control — whether it be that power emanating from the throne or that practiced day in and day out by the landowners — over the lives of the native people and the poor. "Obedience to the great king of Spain and submission to the King of Heaven were demanded as one single act."¹⁷

Regardless of the specific categories one adopts, it seems clear that the Jesus Christ of Latin America was a figure designed to legitimate the presence of colonial rule and to justify the structures of privilege and

power which remained intact even after the arrival of national independence. The prevalence of these Christological images in every mass, catechism, and religious celebration unquestionably contributed to the internalization of the dominant ideology within the popular culture. In that regard, Hugo Assmann indicates that the Christological efforts of the Latin American church only served to yield "alienating Christs" which would impede, if not forbid, the creation of any movement of struggle against oppression:

The Christ of oppressive Christologies really has two faces. On the one side are all the Christs of the power establishment, who do not need to fight because they already hold a position of dominance; on the other are all the Christs of established impotence, who cannot fight against the dominion to which they are subject.¹⁸

The Birth of a Theology of Liberation

It is from within this historical context that the rise of liberation theology in Latin America may best be appreciated.¹⁹ In many respects, one could say that this theological movement was born as a response to the gradual politicization of the continent and the concomitant demand pressed upon the church to break its complicity with an oppressive state. A new theological reflection evolved as a resource and inspiration for those seeking historical and political liberation from centuries of oppression. That effort was motivated as well by a desire to move other Latin American Christians to participate in this liberation process as a consequence of their faith in Jesus Christ.²⁰

Perhaps more appropriately, and yet certainly not in contradiction to the aforementioned, the rise of liberation theology in Latin America can be traced to the radical changes which were taking place in the Roman Catholic Church following the pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council (1963–1965). Convened by Pope John XXIII, the Council placed special emphasis upon the incorporation of the laity into the worship and administrative life of the local parish. Clerics were encouraged to lead mass in the local language of their congregations and to invoke their participation in the interpretation of Scripture. In turn, the Church was called to be a "sign of the times," transforming itself from a symbol of grace outside the worldly realm into a servant which lives "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of people of this age, especially those who are poor and afflicted. . . ."²¹

In the words of one liberationist, Vatican II "had the effect of a violent earthquake" within the Latin American church.²² For quite prac-

tical reasons, its ramifications were experienced almost immediately in the region. Although the relocation of priests and sisters, both national and foreign, to the rural areas and barrios admittedly was an important factor in this development, it was perhaps ironically the scarcity of their numbers which was even more significant. In pre-Vatican II times, the paucity of clerics had meant that 'out of the way' parishes would only be visited once a month (if they were lucky) at which time mass would be celebrated and the rites for past births and deaths performed. With the formation of new pastoral models, however, catechists were regularly given leadership roles in the parish so that religious activities could be realized when the cleric could not be present. These catechists were trained to facilitate small groups in Biblical reflection and encouraged to explore ways in which the parish might confront the perceived needs of the surrounding community. The new perspectives which the poor brought to religious faith and Scriptural interpretation sowed the seeds which slowly grew into what has come to be known as a theology of liberation.

Partially as a response to the burgeoning changes already taking place on the 'base' level of the Church, the bishops of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) held a major meeting in Medellín, Colombia in 1968 in order to consider the implications of Vatican II for Latin America. At the Medellín Conference the bishops addressed the tragic social, economic, and political situation within which the majority of their population lived. For perhaps the first time they asserted that these historical conditions should be a central concern for the ministry and theology of the Church and resolved themselves "to be certain that our preaching, liturgy, and catechesis take into account the social and community dimension of Christianity. . . ." ²³ In short, the Conference proposed theological and pastoral guidelines which would move the Latin American Church to accompany its poor and enable them to become "subjects of their own development."²⁴ It legitimated the attempts at renewal which had already taken place within the Church and provided a further impulse for the creation of fresh theological reflections based in Latin America's own social reality.

In many respects the preparatory meetings and preliminary papers which set the stage for the Medellín Conference were quite important in themselves for the genesis of liberation theology. The delegation of 130 bishops who were to attend the conference were divided along theological and social lines. Among that number, a significant group propounded a developmental solution to the problems afflicting their continent which promised to progressively lift their people out of the depths of poverty. Others advocated a total liberation from the structures which maintained this situation of dependence. These underlying currents,

then, were quite evident in the various position papers which sought to influence the final shape of both the agenda and the final documents of the Conference itself. In this respect, the gathering of bishops provided the occasion for a critical mass of theological reflection upon the themes which were most troubling to the awakened clergy and laity of the church.

The emergence of liberation theology as an academic discipline is most often dated with the publication in 1971 of Gustavo Gutiérrez' seminal work *A Theology of Liberation*.²⁵ It cannot be overemphasized, however, that grassroots theological reflection had already been established within ecclesial base communities well before that time and had promoted the production of informally written materials throughout the continent. As Gutiérrez himself admitted in the introduction of his book, "many in Latin America have started along the path to liberation . . . ; whatever the validity of these pages, it is due to their experiences and reflections."²⁶

From the start, Gutiérrez and the other early liberation theologians expressed their conviction that the world and its history raise specific questions and challenges which should be the starting point for any theological endeavor. On that basis, they roundly critiqued a North Atlantic theology which "seems to have avoided for a long time reflecting on the conflictual character of human history, the confrontation among [human beings], social classes, and countries."²⁷ They called for a re-evaluation of the church's approach to revelation, one which would move away from the speculation of that which happens in the supernatural or ideal realm toward a fundamental concern for its relation to the world of humanity. Within their redefinition of theology was contained the means by which they proposed to carry out this task: "theology as a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word."²⁸

Liberation theology, then, was created as a challenge to those theological systems which have traditionally framed God's salvific work exclusively, or even primarily, within the spiritual and personal ('transcendent') orders of otherworldly reality. As Juan Luis Segundo explains, it has sought to

maintain that there are not two separate orders—one being a supernatural order outside history and the other being a natural order inside history; that instead one and the same grace raises human beings to a supernatural level and provides them with the means they need to achieve their true destiny within one and the same historical process.²⁹

For that reason liberationists proclaim a God who reveals Self in the unfolding of historical events themselves. They suspect that as long as the

central doctrines of the Christian faith—of God, Christ, salvation and sin, only to mention a few—are not based in a critical reflection grounded in history, those doctrines will surely be utilized by those who hold positions of power to maintain their hegemony.

Although qualifiers such as “new” and “radical” certainly describe the impact which liberation theology has brought to bear on the Latin American Church, it should not be assumed that the movement considers itself as anything but the proper expression of ‘authentic’ Christianity. It believes that the full significance of the Scriptural testimony of God’s acts of salvation and liberation, leading from the exodus of God’s people from Egypt to the good news preached and lived by Jesus Christ, has been continually compromised and tempered by an established church more interested in stability than vitality. Liberationists contend that the various forms of ‘escapist’ religion which ignore the crises of the human drama—and yet nevertheless predominate in contemporary society—are false distortions of a living faith which realizes itself in concrete activity in the world. Thus, they conceive of their task as a reclamation and fulfillment of Biblical revelation and Christian praxis.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Latin American bishops and theologians spoke with one unified voice after the Medellín Conference. Efforts toward a clear theological option in favor of the marginalized of Latin America was not an easy, and by no means, universal, choice. As evidence of that fact, the development of Christologies which consciously took these historical realities into account elicited a reactionary response from those sectors of the church who saw their own ‘orthodox’ Christologies, replete with titles and substantive nouns extracted from an alien conceptual world, under challenge.³⁰ They justifiably perceived this new theological movement as a threat to their own interests, be they ecclesiastical, economic or social. In short time, the Latin American Church became engaged in a serious Christological debate over the existence of a myriad of conflicting images of Christ which struggled for prominence. Assmann was quite correct when he suggested that this discussion was really only the beginning of a much larger battle, for the issues underlying the conflict had deep roots: “there is no immediate prospect of a solution [to the debate on conflicting Christologies] . . . because there is no immediate prospect of a solution for the serious social contradictions which exist in a ‘Christian’ Latin America.”³¹

As a result, it has become quite clear to Latin American theologians—though perhaps still not admitted among those who claim that only the liberationists have made a political stance³²—that one’s social location and ideological commitments will determine, to a great extent, the image of Jesus at which one arrives. For every interpreter will unavoidably ground hermeneutics in that particular ideology³³ to which one is

committed. Echoing the conclusions reached by Schweitzer in his study of the European quest, Míguez Bonino reaffirms that “in the course of history, the face of Jesus has frequently taken on the features of the person — ideal or historical — who best represented what at that moment [people] most closely linked with the Christian religion or with the fullness of humanity.” Taking that history into account, Míguez Bonino does not find it surprising that in Latin America today there are only reactionary, reformist and revolutionary readings of the germinal events of the Christian faith, for there are only reactionary, reformist and revolutionary engagements within the present historical process.³⁴

Given the intractability of that problem, liberationists contend that the challenge for all theologians, be they from Latin America or anywhere else in the world, is to move beyond a simple process of justification and determinism within one’s own Christological reflection. However, contrary to common (post-Enlightenment) wisdom, such a safeguard is not thought to be gained simply in the elaboration of a completely ‘objective’ scientific method that will produce results which are supposedly neutral and free of bias. In reality, that would only serve to mask an interpreter’s true underlying commitments. What is most essential is that, as a theologian, one comes to terms with the ideology manifest within one’s own interpretations in order to open oneself and others to honest criticism.³⁵

Liberationists believe that this can best be done by immersing oneself in an active praxis which is based on the “spirit of Jesus” — i.e., the ethical demands of one’s Christology — followed by a critical analysis of one’s experiences, and culminating with a re-evaluation of the Scriptural sources which have contributed to the formation of one’s Christology; from there, the circle then turns again in search of new discoveries and understandings. Such a methodological circle is necessary “since there is no direct route from divine revelation to theology: the mediation of some praxis is inevitable.”³⁶ Ample consideration of these hermeneutical commitments will be provided in the ensuing pages.

Does Liberation Theology Say Anything New?

Not everyone was convinced that Gutiérrez’ book as well as other works written by Latin American liberation theologians in the early 1970s delivered the radical break from North Atlantic theology which they had promised.³⁷ In an “open letter” addressed to Míguez Bonino, German political theologian Jürgen Moltmann, while finding much to praise in the nascent movement, nonetheless questioned whether it really offered anything distinct from that which had already been

mapped out in the progression of post-Enlightenment thought in Europe:

Gutiérrez presents the process of liberation in Latin America as the continuation and culmination of the European history of freedom. . . . This is all worked through independently and offers many new insights — but precisely only in the framework of Europe's history, scarcely in the history of Latin America. Gutiérrez has written an invaluable contribution to European theology. But where is Latin America in it all?³⁸

Although Moltmann's critique was not well received in Latin America, his analysis was, on some levels, difficult to refute. For it cannot be denied that the major theological categories of liberation theology are largely worked out within the philosophical and conceptual framework of post-Enlightenment thought. It also seems indisputable that the liberation movement, especially in its initial phases, relied on the Biblical research of that heritage for its cogent support. Even liberation theologians will readily admit that they highly value those emancipatory factors which have been operative within the European heritage.³⁹

Nevertheless, it is difficult to understand how Moltmann could have failed to see the essential character of Latin America "in it all." Gutiérrez, Míguez Bonino, and other liberation writers incorporated into their theological works an in-depth analysis of the social, political, and economic dependency of their own continent and built a strong case that the yearnings for liberation which those conditions produced should be the basis upon which to construct a theology.⁴⁰ In so doing, they had inverted that method typically employed by theological reflection in Europe and North America. In simple terms, rather than approaching their pastoral setting with a fixed body of doctrines which merely lacked implementation, they consciously placed a priority on that pastoral setting—viz., a presence with the exploited and marginalized sectors of the society—as a lens from which to view Scripture and the tradition of the church. In this vein, Leonardo Boff included in his first major work on liberation theology the following caveat:

The predominantly foreign literature that we cite ought not to delude anyone. It is with preoccupations that are ours alone, taken from our Latin American context, that we will reread not only the old texts of the New Testament but also the most recent commentaries written in Europe.⁴¹

In many respects, then, the distinctive character of liberation theology is to be found in the method which guides its orientation and not always, or even necessarily, in the theological categories and references

of its elaboration.⁴² This recognition indicates three important considerations which are absent (or implicitly discounted) from Moltmann's critique. Firstly, the pastoral setting within which liberation theology is fashioned causes it to stress specific options of faith that are largely ignored in the theological systems which originate from locales shaped by vastly different historical conditions. Theology as a second act seeks to articulate that which has been learned about God and God's truth based upon a critical reflection of a practical engagement. Perhaps an actual narrative from Latin America might best exemplify this priority of the pastoral setting.

Bishop Urioste has seen more suffering than one would care to see in a lifetime. He was a close advisor to assassinated Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero and has personally ministered to his country in a time when corpses daily littered El Salvador's streets and fields. He once shared with me how a woman from his diocese helped him come to terms with these modern day crosses.

The woman visited him after she had found her nephew and his wife dead alongside one of the roads which lead out of the capital of San Salvador. The National Guard had arrived at their home late one night, charging that the two young people were part of the guerilla movement. Perhaps they were involved in a labor union or had been overheard criticizing the government; it does not take much to be considered subversive in most Latin American countries. They were forcibly removed from their home and nothing was heard about them until two days later, when their mutilated bodies were found at the edge of town. The head of her nephew had been decapitated, a common style of execution used to intimidate.

As Bishop Urioste retold the story, the sadness visiting his face betrayed the tragedy which had accompanied its first hearing. "What can one say to a woman who has just undergone such suffering? I was speechless, because I could not bring myself to tell her that everything would be O.K. I knew I would say that only to comfort myself, not her." So he sat next to the woman without saying a word, sharing with her the agony of the silence of the cross.

After a few minutes, the woman lifted her head and said to the grieving priest, "Don't be sad, Padre. I want to read you something that has helped to comfort me." And as she spoke these words, she began to turn the tattered pages of her Bible, finally arriving at the passage marked with the stain of tears:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? 'How far from saving me,' the words I groan. I call all day, my God, but you never answer; all night long I call and cannot rest.

Yet, Holy One, you make your home in the praises of Israel, in you our ancestors put their trust and you rescued them; they called to you for help and they were saved. They never trusted in vain. For God has not despised or disdained the poor one in poverty; God has not hidden God's face from the poor one, but has answered when the poor have called (Psalm 22).

Having recounted the faith of this woman, Bishop Urioste proceeded to explain to me the theological lesson she had taught him. At least since the Biblical story of Job, and no doubt before, it has been assumed that fortune and success are a sign of a righteous life, while poverty and suffering are instruments of God's punishment. If that be the case, then Calvary presents at least two major question marks. Firstly, how could Jesus' mission have failed? And secondly, how could God have been present in such an ignominious death? There are no absolute answers to either of these problems. However, it seems that at the edge of existence the presence of God mysteriously appears and promises a resurrected day for those who have every reason to abandon hope. When all events point to the conclusion that God has cursed those in suffering, the suffering ones find God is walking with them. So the woman from El Salvador did not interpret either her poverty or the death of her family members as a punishment from God, but experienced the presence of God as a hope in her despair.

Strangely enough, the abandonment of God is more a problem for us in the developed world who know very little about death and pain as daily encounters in life, and understand the process of accumulation much better than that of loss. Who has not felt an alienation from God when misfortune has come to one's door? Who is not inclined to doubt the very existence of God when reflecting on the evil which operates in the world?

One cannot ignore the deep mark which our socio-economic system inculcates on our collective psyche. Ownership is the dominant mode by which the members of our culture develop a sense of identity and by which we determine our social relations. The seemingly unlimited ability to possess capital and material objects gives us a sense of security and control in relation to the dynamics which interact to create our social system. In some sense, then, the inability to 'own' or have some level of control over the activities of God produces in us a religious alienation. When the unfortunate events of history occur and leave a trail of suffering in their wake, we suppose they testify to an absence of God; a present and existing God would surely be responsive to our personal needs and pursuits. In this context, Jon Sobrino once remarked to me, "The developed world so believes that it has the right of private ownership for everything

that it enters into a crisis once it discovers that it cannot own God.”⁴³

The story of the bereaved Salvadoran woman — or should it be called the story of the bereaved bishop? — indicates the vital role which the Latin American experience plays in the formation of its theological reflection. The continent’s history of suffering has engendered in its people a strong social consciousness which informs the interpretive priorities of its theological method. For suffering, despite its quality as an unjustifiable negative experience, may nonetheless serve as an “interruption of structures that attempt to control rather than inform history; an interruption of theories that deny the dangerous memories and transformative narratives of cultural traditions.”⁴⁴

In that context, Tamez explains how a popular consciousness shaped by centuries of suffering demands the stress of essential aspects of human reality over more peripheral concerns, thereby structuring the grid through which the past testimonies of faith will be read:

The story told in the various Biblical accounts is one of oppression and struggle, as is the history of our Latin American people. In fact, our present story can be seen as a continuation of what we are told in Biblical revelation. . . . Oppression and liberation are the very substance of the entire historical context within which divine revelation unfolds, and only by reference to this central fact can we understand the meaning of faith, grace, love, peace, sin and salvation.⁴⁵

In sum, liberation theology seeks to interpret the traditions and symbols of Christian witness in light of the concerns and categories which fashion their own Latin American experience of human reality.

Critics of liberation theology also often overlook a second key element which distinguishes the movement from the major currents of European and North American theology. Unlike so many scholars of the North Atlantic, it is unable to ignore the inescapable presence of ideology within any given theology; the polarized realities of Latin America make those ideological commitments quite overt.⁴⁶ Although it is true that liberationists rely extensively on a Marxist social analysis largely developed in Europe, it is the integration of that analysis into their own theological method which is unique. In that respect, their collective historical experience provides them with a host of suspicions that challenge what we might consider even the most innocuous of theological systems.

Once again it is a peasant woman from El Salvador who helps to illustrate this point. I met Ana in a refugee camp after she had fled from her home in the countryside. She was a widow whose husband had been killed by the military because of his work as a community organizer within their local Catholic parish. She had come to the camp for the sake

of her children, hoping that at least she could give them the gift of life; she had nothing else to offer them. They now shared their living space with over two hundred people in large dormitories constructed out of corrugated iron. A daily diet of tortillas and beans for the adults, with limited vegetables and fruits for the children, sustained them “until it’s all over.”

Ana admitted that she does not know what it would mean to be “over;” for the peasants of El Salvador have always seemed to struggle against a poverty which kills — a different kind of violence, to be sure, but one just as deadly. But her faith in God tells her that this hell must end. With a powerful moral force, she informed me:

I, as a mother, feel the weight of this war. In our country the law of God is being violated. We are not living by the law of God, but by the law of evil human beings. A small amount of people are living the way that everyone should.

There needs to be a change so that we all can live the way that God desires. Although we are treated like animals and receive no respect from those who have power in our country, we know that we are human beings because God loves us. Isn’t that what it means to be made in God’s image?

During the same time I was coming to know Ana and other refugees in the camp, U.S. theologian Michael Novak was invited to El Salvador to address the National Association of Free Enterprise — a powerful Salvadoran organization which represents the interests of the wealthy oligarchy. Novak entitled his lecture “A Theology of Creation.” He proposed that in creation God had given to each individual the gifts and talents which are necessary for productive work. Foremost among these gifts was that of the intellect, which possessed the creative potential of multiplying capital out of the productive force possessed by each individual. It would be a sin, he explained, to limit the freedom of individuals to use capital and the modes of production, for God had made us in the divine image to be creators upon the earth. The fruits of bountiful profits, therefore, were to be fully enjoyed because they are the sign of the divine blessing given to a “faithful steward.”

Novak presents a theology of creation which is by no means foreign for most of us who live in the United States. We have been taught from birth that God has especially blessed our country because we have responsibly used the talents which have been given to us. And on an individual level, it is common wisdom that anyone can succeed as long as one works hard enough.

But Ana's experience provides her with certain basic suspicions regarding the ideological content of any theology which legitimates private gain at the expense of the community and she does not need the help of a Marxist social analysis to uncover it! She would have every reason in the world to believe that the peasants of El Salvador are not deserving of the dignity which has been granted to all human beings by divine creation. The teachings of the church have traditionally communicated to them that they should accept their preordained state as a source of productive labor — how often the dictum "slaves obey your masters" was used from the pulpit! The unmistakable message was that the social order had been divinely established and it was a sin to try to change it.

Nonetheless, Ana implicitly perceives the logical implications of such a theology: God has only blessed a small minority of the population with the gifts necessary to be successfully creative, while the vast majority of the people have either been created without these gifts or have failed to use them properly. Ana reads the Bible in a quite different way. She finds in the book of Genesis and throughout Scripture a God who created human beings in order to care for the creation and each other. It was in the Fall, and not in Creation, when that harmony was destroyed and human beings sought to usurp the role of God for the power to dominate and control. In her theology, then, the pursuit of individual happiness is subservient to the care of the human family, for selfishness is a violation against God and all of God's creatures. In short, for Ana the value of the human person can never be determined in relation to one's economic value, for God has given every person a dignity and value which cannot be eradicated by any earthly power.

Although Ana has not had access to the sophisticated tools of social science, her personal experiences have nonetheless enabled her to unmask the human attitudes which are bound up with the social structures. In turn, the suspicions generated from that insight are used to critically evaluate the underpinnings of theologies which have been presented to her as an explanation of her world.

In much the same way, liberation theologians incorporate social analysis as a primary step in the reflective process. They do not pretend to claim that their method will thereby provide 'correct' explanations, much less solutions, to the human dilemma. Rather, they believe that "an adequate analysis, drawing upon all of the resources of [their] personal and communal experience in light of a proper use of the social sciences, will allow the right questions to emerge."⁴⁷ The responsibility of theology, they conclude, is to respond to those questions with integrity.

Thirdly, Moltmann's critique fails to take into account the true subjects of liberation theology; it is not simply a theological theory, but can more accurately be characterized as an ecclesial-political movement.⁴⁸

Liberation theologians stress that they have not attempted to write the definitive theology for Latin America, but view their reflections as part of a process which is moving in a forward trajectory—a beginning step, not the final product. They are seeking to equip their people with the tools which will make possible the creation of more indigenous theologies arising out of their own historical experience and struggle for concrete liberation.

However, as the Salvadoran women of the preceding stories manifest, this process is dialogical. It is the movement of the base which provides the motivation and direction for those theologians who have made a commitment to the popular struggle.

Beatriz Melano Couch thus explains that the theological method which guides liberation theology is “a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of hope born of engagement.”⁴⁹ The collective suspicions of the community regarding the present construction of reality will lead to a hope that a more liberative knowledge and vision for seeing the world can be imagined. That hope, in turn, arises from an active engagement on behalf of real change for those who are victims of personal and structural exploitation. This method, then, seeks to fashion “a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed.”⁵⁰

Summary

“The debate on the theology of liberation begins to be a fruitful one when it broadens into a debate of the history of Latin America, which is also part of the history of the church and its theology.”⁵¹ For it is in Latin America’s story of conquest and oppression that we find images of Jesus which served to reinforce the social, political, and ecclesial structures imposed and maintained by the conquistadors, while masking Jesus’ liberative message of historical liberation. The cross and resurrection were commonly dichotomized to present either a suffering Jesus who was impotent before the powers which controlled his fatal destiny or a celestial Jesus who had triumphantly risen to assume the reign of an imperial kingdom. Thus, be it conscious or not, the primary function of Christology in Latin America was to baptize and sacralize the conquest of the continent and make a virtue out of the consequent suffering of its people.

Liberation theology arose in Latin America as an effort to reconcile theology and the practice of the church to the reality of these sinful conditions of human alienation. The existence of millions of nonpersons within its continent challenged its theologians to put their discipline at

the service of a project which struggles to open the historical process for those who have been excluded from it. For that reason, liberation theology has been especially critical of those speculative theologies which debate over possible ideas which might explain the 'essential nature' of God while ignoring the very signs of God's liberative presence as they are unveiled within human history. In contrast, it poses theological reflection as a second step which responds to an active engagement for the liberation of the world.

In like manner, its Christology aims to uncover the significance of Jesus Christ for the lives of human beings and communities who are engaged in the creative process of liberation within the present historical structures. Liberationists thereby seek to rediscover the Jesus who was crucified because of his active praxis on behalf of the marginalized and excluded and was resurrected to work with his disciples to transform their present reality into a 'new creation.'

Notes

1. John Mackay, *The Other Spanish Christ: A Study in the Spiritual History of Spain and South America* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1932), 41. Mackay's book is obviously dated, but contains an endless supply of perceptive insights into the legacy of Spanish spirituality.

2. Saul Trinidad, "Christology, *Conquista*, Colonization," in *Faces of Jesus*, 54.

3. Rebecca Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), 11. Chopp suggests that Protestantism functioned as an ideological justification of neocolonialism in this period of Latin American history in the same way that Catholicism had served in the colonial era. Míguez Bonino draws much the same conclusion in *Revolutionary Society*.

4. Gutiérrez, "Praxis de liberación, teología, y anuncio," in *Liberación: Diálogos en el CELAM* (Bogotá: CELAM, 1974), 69.

5. Eduardo Galeano challenges any such pretension when writing about Latin America's plight: "There are those who believe that destiny rests on the knees of the gods; but the truth is that it confronts the conscience of man [sic] with a burning challenge," *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 283.

6. Chopp, *Praxis of Suffering*, 20.

7. Christopher Columbus, who was a very religious man, wrote of his mission to carry Christ to the New World as a fulfillment of the Old Testament

prophecies: "The truth is that all things will pass away, but God's word will not pass away, for all that God has spoken is to be fulfilled. [As the Bible says,] 'Surely have the coastal dwellers hoped in me, and the ships of Tarsus from the very first; to bear their sons from afar, and their silver and gold along with them, to the name of their God, the Holy One of Israel, who has given them glory' (Isaiah 60:9). . . . How clear it is that he meant these lands! . . . and that it was from Spain that his holy name would spread far and wide among the gentiles. . . . And after saying this by the mouth of Isaiah, he made me his messenger, and showed me where to go," quoted in Saul Trinidad, "Christology, *Conquista*, and Colonization," 56.

Trinidad has added his own commentary to Columbus' manifesto: "Columbus' praxis, [i.e.] his 'pastoral' behavior, is the very negation of the incarnation, indeed of the faith itself — for faith should have asked, 'What does it mean to believe in Christ as I stand here before the American Indian?,' " *ibid.*

8. Galeano, *Open Veins*, 50.

9. This story follows the recounting given by Eduardo Galeano in *Memory of Fire: Genesis*, Vol 1., trans. Cedric Belfrage (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 57.

Surely John MacKay was right when he poetically contested: "The royal coffers of Spain brimmed over with gold, and that became her ruin. She had emerged from her 'cavern' to conquer and catholicize the New World. She conquered it, and in its catholicization de-Christianized herself, and returned not to a cavern but to a grave," *Spanish Christ*, 41.

10. Bartolomé de las Casas, quoted in Bussmann, *Who Do You Say?*, 7.

11. In the words of Míguez Bonino: "The ancient dream of a 'Catholic kingdom,' a unified political and religious structure ruled by Catholic teaching down to its last details—the dream that could never be realized in Europe—was transported to Latin America. 'Christianization' meant the inauguration of this dream in this land—the dream of creating Christianity 'from top to bottom,' " *Polémica, Diálogo y Misión: Catolicismo Romano y Protestantismo en América Latina* (Uruguay: Centro de Estudios Cristianos, 1966), 23.

12. Gutiérrez provides this biting critical overview of the history of the Latin American church: "The Church in Latin America was born alienated. It has not, from the start and despite some valiant efforts to the contrary, been the master of its own destiny. Decisions were taken outside of the subcontinent. After the wars of independence of the last century, a sort of ecclesiastical "colonial treaty" was established. Latin America was to supply the 'raw materials': the faithful, the Marian cult, and popular devotions; Rome and the Churches of the Northern hemisphere were to supply the 'manufactured goods': studies of Latin American affairs, pastoral directives, clerical education, the right to name bishops—and even supply them—money for works and missions. In other words, the generally dependent situation of Latin America is just as real in Church affairs," "Contestation in Latin America," in Teodoro Jiménez Urresti, ed., *Contestation in the Church*, Concilium 68 (New York: Herder/Seabury, 1971), 45.

13. Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering*, 9.

14. Georges Casalis, "Jesus—Neither Abject Lord nor Heavenly Monarch," in *Faces of Jesus*, 72–76. For a more extensive study of the diverse images of Jesus in Latin America, see *Cristianismo y Sociedad* 13, no. 43–44 (1975); both issues are focussed entirely upon this subject.

15. *Ibid.*, 73.

16. Trinidad, "Christology, *Conquista*, Colonization," 59.

17. José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 5.

18. Hugo Assmann, "The Power of Christ in History: Conflicting Christologies and Discernment," in *Frontiers*, 149.

19. My analysis has thus far concentrated on the Catholic antecedents of the development of Christology in Latin America. One cannot ignore that a liberation movement has also taken root within the Protestant churches, albeit to a lesser extent within an already minority tradition. Míguez Bonino helps to explain the convergences and divergences of the Protestant movement to that of its Catholic counterpart: "The points of resemblance would include a gradually growing and deepening awareness that leads one from one step to the next: from a rather vague and charitable concern with social issues to works of social service, then to an awareness of structural conditioning factors, and then to a realization of the priority of the political realm and the inevitable association of theological reflection with socio-political analyses and options. The points of difference would include: membership in a minority religious community with a tradition of avoiding explicit politics while maintaining de facto ties with the system of liberal capitalism and the 'neocolonial' setup, and a theological tradition going back to the Reformation," "Historical Praxis and Christian Identity," in *Frontiers*, 261.

20. Jon Sobrino, *Jesús en América Latina: Su Significado Para La Fe y la Cristología*. (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1982), 22. Cf. also Leonardo Boff: "... It is the overall context of dependence and oppression at every level of life that prompts Christology in Latin America to ponder and love Jesus Christ as Liberator. The theme was not willed into being by a few theologians. ... It arose as a concrete demand of faith for Christians who felt summoned to wipe out the humiliating conditions imposed on their fellow [*sic*] human beings. In Jesus Christ, they found motives and stimuli for the cause of liberation," *Jesús Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology For Our Time*, trans. Patrick Hughes, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1978), 267.

21. "Gaudium et spes," no. 1, in Walter M. Abbot, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 199.

22. José Comblin, "The Church in Latin America after Vatican II," *LADOC* 7 (Jan.–Feb. 1977): 1.