

REVIEW

## Noah Oehri, *Landscapes of Liberation: Mission and Development in Peru's Southern Highlands, 1958–1988*

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Andrew Orta 

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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With *Landscapes of Liberation*, Noah Oehri has written a richly documented regional study of a crucial period of Catholic pastoral work in Peru. Oehri traces the arc of a re-engagement of global Catholicism with the southern Peruvian highlands, focusing on the decades from the late 1950s to the 1980s. That is a significant time for Latin American Catholicism generally, made more interesting in Oehri's telling of this local case because of coordinate developments in Peruvian politics and social movement, in development practices, and in mission- and development-adjacent social sciences. This insistence on keeping missionaries, development agents, secular social movements, and scholars as component parts of the analytic frame is a strength of the work.

The through-line in all of this for Oehri is a concern about development, or 'modernization', as this shaped the mid-century re-engagement with the 'forgotten' communities of the altiplano. From the opening pages, Oehri draws the reader's attention to the physical space of the altiplano to argue that it reflected and embodied the twining of spiritual and material deprivation in the lives of Indigenous highland communities, and that this complex of precarity and immiseration at once inspired and confounded generations of Church agents as they strove to enact a liberating pastoral praxis.

The chapters move chronologically and are bundled into three sections distinguishing distinct eras: 'Modernizing Catholicism (1943–1968)'; 'Liberating Evangelization (1968–1980)'; and 'Mobilizing Faith (1980–1988)'. The early chapters nicely establish the tight connection between the mid-twentieth-century pastoral re-engagement and a framing of the Andean region as a problematic site in need of remedial modernisation through development and the dissolution of cultural and economic institutions considered survivals of colonialism. Encountering Puno at a time when its perception as 'a space-to-be-developed' (p. 10) was over-determined by converging currents of local and national politics, international development ideologies, postwar geopolitics, and regional area studies, Catholic missionaries assimilated their pastoral aims to these surging currents. The title of an early chapter, 'Compulsive Modernization', gestures to the force of these trends in shaping mission work.

Subsequent chapters trace the deployment of different pastoral groups, a sequence of development schemes and infrastructure projects, along with the intensifying imbrication of Catholic pastoral agents with regional social movements focused on issues of land reform and with national plans to encourage the resettlement of highlanders in the fertile valleys and lowlands. This moment opens on to the post-Conciliar period of Latin American Catholicism. In Oehri's Peru-focused telling, the encounters of the 'modernizing' period brought the missionaries to grips with the social and economic challenges facing the communities of the region, raising new questions for them regarding the ultimate aims and methods of their pastoral work. The ferment of post-Conciliar and post-Medellín pastoral work in Latin America created a space for cohorts of missionaries to undertake a series of new forms of pastoral praxis built out of an iterative critical review of their work to date and newly emerging understandings of the altiplano realities. The critiques and alternatives provided missionaries with a new conceptual vocabulary for seeing and acting in the *puneño* context. And, in the post-Conciliar period, their focus on modernisation is reframed as one shaped by evolving conceptualisations of 'liberation' as a religious, political and economic ideal.

The missionaries did not undertake this work alone. Oehri details various forms and degrees of alliance between pastoral projects and the land reforms and other developmentalist policies implemented by the Gobierno Revolucionario de las Fuerzas Armadas (Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces), whose seizure of power coincided closely with the conclusion of the 1968 Medellín meetings of the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (Latin American Episcopal Conference). He also addresses connections between developing pastoral praxis in Peru and the work of Peruvian research centres, such as the Instituto Pastoral Andina (Andean Pastoral Institute, home of the journal *Allpanchis*) and the Centro Bartolomé de las Casas, that nurtured the development of important lines of anthropological scholarship by clerical and church-related scholars and their cross-fertilisation with a coincident boom in Andean studies. Although it is not developed extensively, there is important material here regarding the emergence of more culturalist reflections on the specificities of Indigenous Andean communities and the legacies of colonial evangelisation that shaped the overlap of liberationist and inculturationalist pastoral work in the Andes.

Much of the discussion of liberation theology here rehearses characterisations and narratives of pastoral practice familiar from other work. *Landscapes of Liberation* does not offer a significantly new 'take' on the liberationist Church. There is, however, something important gained by the accumulating richness of Oehri's presentation of this history as it unfolded through a single pastoral zone and through the narrative attention to the ways liberationist pastoral work was always embedded within the political and scholarly climate of the time.

One limitation of the work, particularly given its tight focus on the southern Peruvian highlands, is the lack of substantive engagement with Indigenous communities of the region. We learn about them in a fragmentary fashion: mainly through the reflections and preoccupations of missionaries, trends in scholarly work, government policies and campesino social movements. But none of that coheres to present any documentation of community life or pastoral and parish activities on the ground to complement the intricate details at the level of shifting pastoral policy

and changes in personnel. Similarly, apart from some early mention of Adventist pastoral work, there is minimal discussion of non-Catholic missionary activity in the area, even as a point of reference for the Catholic pastoral teams.

The regional focus is constraining in another way as there is limited engagement with similar case studies from elsewhere in the Andes, let alone elsewhere in Latin America. This hampers Oehri's ability to tell and show us what is gained by the distinctive local focus of the study. The southern Peruvian pastoral zone of interest here was an important point of reference for a network of Catholic pastoral agents that extended beyond Peru. Additional attention to these wider networks, as well as closer engagement with case studies of contemporaneous pastoral encounters elsewhere in the Andes might enable a more developed analytic discussion about what is to be learned from these southern Peruvian landscapes of liberation.

Notwithstanding those limitations, Oehri works with an impressive range of sources to present a richly layered discussion of a key era in the history of contemporary Catholicism in Peru. *Landscapes of Liberation* tells a complex story and will serve as an important reference for scholars and students interested in understanding the liberationist Catholic Church of the time in the dynamic institutional contexts of the Peruvian Andes.