

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Revolution and Redemption in Central America

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This essay reviews the following works:

The World Come of Age: An Intellectual History of Liberation Theology. By Lilian Calles Barger. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. x + 376. \$34.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780190695392.

The Latino Christ in Art, Literature, and Liberation Theology. By Michael R. Candelaria. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018. Pp. 248. \$65.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780826358790.

Óscar Romero's Theological Vision: Liberation and the Transfiguration of the Poor. By Edgardo Colón-Emeric. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018. Pp. xvi + 400. \$39.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780268104733.

La guerra por otros medios: Comunicación insurgente y proceso revolucionario en El Salvador (1970–1992). By Eudald Cortina Orero. San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2017. Pp. 563. \$13.00. ISBN: 9789996110375.

Ixcán: Pastoral de acompañamiento en área de guerra, Guatemala 1981–1987. By Ricardo Falla. Vol. 5, part 1 of *Al atardecer de la vida*. Guatemala: Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales en Guatemala, 2017. ISBN: 9789929663015.

Las lógicas del genocidio guatemalteco: Febrero 1982 a agosto 1983. By Ricardo Falla. Vol. 6 of *Al atardecer de la vida*. Guatemala: Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales en Guatemala, 2018. ISBN: 9789929663015.

What You Have Heard Is True: A Memoir of Witness and Resistance. By Carolyn Forché. New York: Penguin, 2020. Pp. 400. \$18.00 paperback. ISBN: 9780525560395.

Caribbean Revolutions: Cold War Armed Movements. By Rachel A. May, Alejandro Schneider, and Roberto González Arana. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 174. \$24.99 paperback. ISBN: 9781108440905.

After Insurgency: Revolution and Electoral Politics in El Salvador. By Ralph Sprenkels. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018. Pp ix + 484. \$50.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780268103255.

Blood in the Fields: Óscar Romero, Catholic Social Teaching, and Land Reform. By Matthew Philipp Whelan. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020. Pp. 336. \$65.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780813232522.

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Visions of heaven often shape earthbound choices. In the wake of the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, it seemed in Central America that the status quo of unequal societies, legitimized by the Catholic Church and held firmly in place by military dictatorships, would be overturned. The Kingdom of God could be built on earth. Priests joined peasants in recuperating land for subsistence farming. Students and workers who had suffered repression picked up arms for the first time. Solidarity movements sprang up in the North Atlantic, raising awareness about the hidden costs of US empire. More than a few left lives of relative comfort and ease to share the plight of the marginalized, undergoing a sort of conversion in the process. Each of the authors of the ten books under review here struggles with the realization that salvation and redemption are not easily won in historical time, riven as it is with compromised institutions and stubborn hierarchies.

What does it mean to witness? Within the revolutionary moment, how to render visible the workings of a counterinsurgency that sought to eliminate all witnesses? Relatedly, what did insurgent groups do to increase the visibility of their political and military actions? How can one accompany the poor? Given the historical relationship between Christianity and violence in the Americas, how have theologians of liberation transformed the traditions that they inherited? And how have those who participated in the insurgencies and sacrificed to build more equal societies experienced the transition to democracy?

Carolyn Forché poetically distills many of these themes in *What You Have Heard Is True*, a memoir of her witness in the years leading up to the civil war in El Salvador. Her guide is Leonel Gómez Vides, a father of two girls, the owner of a small coffee farm, an organic intellectual, a trophy-winning marksman, and an aficionado of Formula One racing. When Leonel knocks on Forché's door in San Diego in 1977, she is a young poet teaching classes at a local university. She knows almost nothing about El Salvador. But over the next several days, he gives her a crash course in the history of the country, from the days of precolonial Indigenous settlement to their present, when the country seemed to be careening toward civil war. Leonel convinces her that if she wants to write poetry, she needs to see the world. She needs, more specifically, to see for herself what is going on in El Salvador and then explain the situation to people in the United States. In January 1978, she arrives in San Salvador with rudimentary Spanish, cigarettes, sandals, and a willingness to see the world as it is. Leonel cultivates and trains this willingness, often against Forché's wishes. Throughout, the reader is left guessing about Leonel's politics—is he working for the guerrillas, the CIA, the Salvadoran Armed Forces, or the Catholic Church?

The power of this book is the combination of the author's firsthand experiences with the central protagonists of the civil war and her exquisite writing. In the Salvadoran countryside, Forché stayed with *campesinos* who were organizing and suffering brutal repression from the military and the death squads; in San Salvador, she met with officials from the US Embassy, high-ranking military officers, Archbishop Óscar Romero, and the Jesuits at the Universidad Centroamericana. There are moments in the book when the informed reader realizes that Forché is providing historical context for a mass audience who may know little about Central America. For instance, Leonel explains the 1977 murder of the Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande by saying, "But this is a God . . . that Padre Grande taught was not up in the sky lying in some damn cloud hammock" (29). Take out "damn," and we have a line straight from the 1989 film *Romero*, spoken by the actor Richard Jordan in the role of Grande.¹ But such moments are rare and do not detract from this extraordinary artistic document. Forché's book is about learning to see differently by immersing oneself in uncomfortable realities, and then attempting, out of solidarity with an oppressed people, to convey something of those realities to others who have not experienced them and may not wish to see the world as it is. The main difference between *What You Have Heard Is True*

¹ Romero (dir. John Duigan, Los Angeles, Paulist Pictures, 1989), DVD; YouTube video, 1:46:48, quote at 4:37, <https://youtu.be/zEAUxgb7Ac?t=277>.

and the other testimonies of conversion written by or about privileged white folks who left the United States to join the revolutions in Central America is this book's poetic density.

The most radical and rigorously defended thesis in this group of books is put forward not by a historian or an anthropologist, but by a theologian. As Matthew Philipp Whelan argues in *Blood in the Fields*, the struggle to understand the historical reality of late Cold War El Salvador is not only a task for scholars; it is a properly Christian task. Romero wanted us, Whelan writes, "to learn to perceive impoverishment as the primary form of violence with which Christians should be concerned, a violence that is a perpetual attack upon human dignity, which is generated and sustained by structures and institutions, and which is embedded in landscapes" (42). Learning to see deprivation as a form of violence against God's creation requires sharing the struggles of the poor.

Whelan makes two linked and highly original contributions. First, he traces how Romero's commitment to land reform in El Salvador emerged from his fidelity to Catholic social teaching. Second, he demonstrates how that commitment occasioned Romero's martyrdom. While historians and theologians have argued that Romero underwent a dramatic conversion after Grande's assassination, Whelan is part of a new generation of scholars who are challenging that view by charting the continuities in Romero's thought and ministry. He argues that Romero's support for agricultural reform was guided by "a theological grammar of creation as common gift" (20). In making this claim, he meticulously follows the references in Romero's homilies and pastoral letters back to the church's authoritative texts—the Gospel, Thomas Aquinas, Basil the Great, Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), *Populorum Progressio* (1967), and John Paul II's 1979 address to the Latin American bishops in Puebla, Mexico. From the first sentence to the last, the reader feels wisely guided through theological developments and the historical realities in which Romero sought to apply his faith. "Romero is no innovator," Whelan writes (82). By this he means that Romero was orthodox and simply sought to live in a way that was fully consistent with Catholic social teaching.

Whelan builds his argument from a basic but crucial contention: at the heart of Romero's preaching was the belief that "creation is a gift given for common use" (36). In 1975, for example, Romero detailed the plight of coffee harvesters in a weekly periodical published by the Archdiocese of San Salvador; as he advocated for seasonal laborers on coffee farms, he quoted from the Pastoral Constitution of the Catholic Church: "Whatever the forms of property may be, . . . attention must always be paid to this universal destination of earthly goods' (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 69)" (quoted by Whelan, 69). This same axiom about creation would lead him to challenge large landholders not to hoard what God gave to be shared in common. In a country where the vast majority of the population was Catholic, the military and the oligarchy selectively targeted those who worked closely with the oppressed to claim their share of what was already theirs. While changes to land tenure systems that concentrated vast tracts of fertile land in the hands of very few families were often moderate reformist proposals backed by the United States as part of a strategy of counterinsurgency, the Salvadoran oligarchy characterized such measures as "communist" assaults on private property, liberty, and free enterprise. Evaluating the corpus of Romero's writings in light of church teachings and the historical record, Whelan demonstrates that Romero was "not arguing for the abolition of private property, as communism did, but rather for justice in the distribution of land" (4). Romero was killed during the rollout of land reform. The former president of the National Association of Private Enterprise (ANEP), which led the charge against agrarian reform, allegedly paid the sniper about two hundred dollars.

Blood in the Fields comprises five substantive chapters, bookended by an introduction and an epilogue. Whelan writes with exemplary clarity and is measured in his claims. This is one of those rare books that makes us better for reading it, a book through which

the reader comes to see Christianity, El Salvador, and fundamental moral imperatives from a new perspective. Romero was assassinated because of his commitment to a politics of common use, one derived from the theological grammar of creation—that, in short, is Whelan’s major claim.

Ricardo Falla, a Guatemalan Jesuit who is also a professional anthropologist with a PhD from the University of Texas at Austin, was inspired by Romero’s witness. But whereas Romero chose to accompany the poor by remaining in public dialogue with the military government, Falla took a different route. In the early 1980s, he carved out a “clandestine pastorate,” one that was “of the catacombs, from the margins of society, strange, itinerant, barely communicating with the hierarchy [of the church]” (*Ixcán*, 295). Inspired by the Sandinistas’ success in overthrowing the Somoza dictatorship, Falla envisioned this pastorate of accompaniment (“*pastoral de acompañamiento*”) as a cross between Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s guerrilla struggle and the small primitive church of early Christianity (294–295). As a priest, he would accompany rural Guatemalans supporting the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP), an armed revolutionary group that described its orientation as Marxist-Leninist. Sometimes this accompaniment meant saying Mass or baptizing a child, but most often he gave campesinos in the north of the departments of Quiché and Huehuetenango, near the border with Mexico, nothing more than his presence. As an anthropologist embedded with the EGP, Falla had access to everyone from the organization’s comandante and jefe to its sympathizers, collaborators, members, and militants, as well as to the peasantry, who often rejected the presence of the guerrillas in their communities. The field notes, diaries, and documents that he collected and generated between 1981 and 1987 are the foundation of *Ixcán*, the fifth volume of *Al atardecer de la vida*, an extraordinary seven-volume collection of Falla’s writings from 1966 to 2012.²

Each of the two volumes reviewed here is a palimpsest of what historians can use as primary sources: ethnographic observations and intimate reflections that Falla wrote as events unfolded, interwoven with his contextualizing commentary written some four decades later. This jostling between past and present, between notes about his bowel movements on a particular morning followed by learned expositions on the relationship between faith and politics, is both a radical method and a distinctive literary form. He stumbled upon this mode of presentation as he worked with the Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales en Guatemala (Avancso) to gather the writings and notebooks that he had produced over the years. “I would have liked,” Falla says, “for the style to be as lucid, simple, and profound as that of the evangelist Mark, for example, but I have not achieved it” (299). Marcos—Mark—was Falla’s nom de guerre.

Ixcán begins with Falla collaborating with the Frente Sandinista in Nicaragua in July 1981 and being invited by the EGP, via a group of Catholic religious in exile from Guatemala, to return clandestinely to do pastoral work and carry out anthropological investigations in a semi-liberated zone. After discussing the plan with his fellow Jesuits, Falla, with the permission of his provincial, César Jerez, traveled to Cuba with four others for six weeks of training. Three members of the pastorate of accompaniment were Kaqchikel, and two, including Falla, were Ladino. In his diary, we find him repeatedly sobbing. He had recently lost his father, and was trying to learn how to accompany the guerrillas and the civilian populations who supported them. “Why have I been called to this?” he wonders (45). Such moments recur in his diary entries over the years. He later reflects that he entered into pastoral work with a “wounded soul: a void . . . I cried in secret, sometimes in my hammock at night so that no one could see me, or on long walks

² For a review of volumes 1–4, see Manolo E. Vela Castañeda, “Ricardo Falla: Genocide, Indigenous People, and the Art of Resistance,” *Latin American Research Review* 54, no. 1 (2019): 262–268. The seventh volume has not been reviewed in this journal.

or when writing” (289). In retrospect, he comes to understand this weeping as a primeval prayer, one that transforms a person.

Falla was both writing a history of his present and assembling an archive for historians of the future. Rather than silently correct errors of fact or interpretation, he reproduced his original observations as written and added occasional footnotes to indicate errors. *Ixcán* includes transcriptions of original documents from guerrilla commanders and church officials. Although Falla is a priest, he embraced the cosmivision of the Maya communities he accompanied. He was interested in the evangelization of permanent guerrilla fighters who had a “tendency to totalize,” but respected their silence on religious practices and beliefs (107). *Ixcán* is packed with ethnographic gems, like Falla’s notes on a child guerrilla fighter who demanded to be allowed to smoke cigarettes, claiming that children have an equal right to vices (108).

As I read Falla’s diary entries, there were times when I wondered if he and the other members of his pastoral group were not taking advantage of desperately poor people. In October 1983, for instance, his pastorate of accompaniment enjoyed special protection from the guerrillas, while the civilian population was exposed and targeted by the military (122). In the civilian camps, women got up at 3 a.m. to make tortillas for eight or nine additional people beyond their families. The guerrillas promised civilians protection in exchange for food, but they were rarely able to keep this promise. The EGP evacuated Falla’s pastoral team before the genocidal campaign that included the massacre of around three hundred people in San Francisco, which Falla would document from Chiapas, Mexico. As the peasantry fled to Mexico, Falla and his two companions relied on these poor refugees for food; they gave Mass, with few in attendance, as a military helicopter flew over (110). The people who chose not to flee had to “eat dirt and rags,” and yet the Dirección Regional of the EGP instructed Falla’s team to give talks in each encampment to encourage faith and conviction in the struggle (111), and forbade them from sharing information that the organization gave them with the civilian population. The civilians were rightly upset with the guerrillas for leaving them exposed and for not hitting the enemy—the pact of protection for food seemed broken (112). Through Falla’s notes from the time, we also learn of a woman with an injured foot who was forced to walk through the mountains to escape the military, and a husband who was inconsolable about his sick wife. Yet Falla could only say that was “God is with us,” as he did two interviews for his ethnographic investigation (118).

Las lógicas del genocidio guatemalteco, volume 6 of *Al atardecer de la vida*, covers Falla’s exile in Mexico and Nicaragua and consists mainly of previously published reports and essays that describe the genocidal logic of the counterinsurgency strategy initiated by de facto president Efraín Ríos Montt. Chapter 1, “Participación de los cristianos en la revolución,” first circulated as an anonymously authored mimeograph titled “Martirio y lucha en Guatemala.” Chapter 2 contains Falla’s groundbreaking presentation of the testimony of two eyewitnesses to the massacre on the San Francisco farm in Huehuetenango on July 17, 1982, when the Guatemalan military brutally murdered an estimated three hundred Maya men, women, and children. This chapter was first presented at the December 1982 meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, DC, and was published in Spanish in 1983. Chapter 3, “Genocidio en Guatemala,” is Falla’s full report submitted to the Permanent People’s Tribunal in Madrid in January 1983; it was the first effort to systematically document the pattern of massacres in different regions of the country. Chapter 4, “Antropología popular de la cultura mestiza,” was published in 1983 as “Esa muerte que nos hace vivir” in the journal *Christus*. Chapter 5, “El espíritu de Yahvé en clave de revolución,” attempts to understand the liberatory potential of charismatic Christianity for pastoral teams working with the resistance communities in Ixcán; this chapter was not previously published. Chapter 6, “El hambre y otras privaciones,” is Falla’s report to the United Nations special rapporteur for human

rights in Guatemala; here he describes two phases of the state's genocidal campaign: the army massacres of civilian populations of villages in the highlands to "drain the swamp," followed by attempts to starve those populations into submission by burning crops and killing domesticated animals. Chapter 7, "Génesis de la revolución campesina en El Salvador," reproduces Falla's remarks at the doctoral dissertation defense of a Guatemalan Jesuit whose research influenced Falla's subsequent studies among Indigenous communities in Ixcán. Taken together, these chapters document the racialized character of state violence against Maya communities under Ríos Montt.

Whereas Falla's method is that of a participant observer, historian Eudald Cortina Orero's is archival. A superb example of systematic historical research, *La guerra por otros medios* examines the role of communication in the Salvadoran insurgency from 1970 to 1992. Cortina Orero considers three interrelated factors in the revolutionary process: the structures of guerrilla organizations, their strategies of mobilization, and their politics of communication. Both the Salvadoran state and the insurgent groups understood that the war would not be won through military victories alone, but by whichever side could capture the imaginations of the Salvadoran people and the international community. Likewise, the United States was also deeply invested in propagandizing, as Mark Danner's searing account of the Reagan administration's lies about the El Mozote massacre made clear.³ Cortina Orero is not the first scholar to investigate the battle over news coverage during the civil war in El Salvador; Luis Alvarenga's *La gramática de la pólvora* addresses this topic as well, though less systematically.⁴

La guerra por otros medios is organized chronologically and divided into two parts. The first part charts the emergence and consolidation of the insurgent organizations, and the second covers the civil war and the internationalization of the revolutionary movement. The strikes at the end of the 1960s and the electoral fraud of 1972 conditioned the advent of new political-military groups. Students and workers led these strikes, and the repression that they suffered prompted them to mobilize for violence. The stolen elections of 1972 convinced the incipient revolutionary Left that structural changes could not be achieved at the ballot box. Meanwhile, the media in El Salvador was also changing. Up through the 1960s, the content of newspapers was 70 percent publicity and 30 percent sports (83).⁵ But in the 1970s, a wide range of new radio stations and progressive periodicals appeared, including *El Independiente* and *La Crónica del Pueblo*. Cortina Orero analyzes the birth, flourishing, and demise of media projects associated with the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP), the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación "Farabundo Martí" (FPL), the Resistencia Nacional (RN), the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores (PRTC), and the Partido Comunista de El Salvador (PCS), as well as with the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN).

Cortina Orero constructs his argument on a solid empirical base. One gets the sense that he tracked down every last declaration made by El Salvador's armed Left during the twenty-year period covered in this book. In a helpful appendix, he lists the sources for his study and the archives in which they can be found. His main archives are the Centro de Información, Documentación y Apoyo a la Investigación (CIDA) at the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas; the Instituto de Estudios Históricos, Antropológicos y Arqueológicos (IEHAA) at the Universidad de El Salvador; and the Centro de Documentación de los Movimientos Armados (CeDeMA) in Spain. CeDeMA,

³ Mark Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

⁴ Luis Alvarenga, *La gramática de la pólvora: Los debates en la prensa revolucionaria salvadoreña, 1971-1979* (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2016).

⁵ Cortina Orero cites Antonio Herrera, "Influencia de la guerra civil en El Salvador (1980-1992) en el desarrollo de la prensa nacional," *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social* 1 (1998).

directed by Cortina Orero himself, was a project that sought to compile all available journalistic articles from Latin America's insurgent movements.

With this documentary foundation, Cortina Orero argues that the development of insurgent communication in El Salvador can be divided into three periods (508). In the first period (1970–1975), the revolutionary organizations were emerging and consolidating, and their principal mode of communication was through their armed activity—propaganda by the deed—which limited the diffusion of the politics that oriented these actions to those who were already politicized and knew how to read what must have seemed to the uninitiated like delinquency. Actions such as hijacking a radio station helped strengthen the collective identity of these fledgling organizations. Armed struggle became for the new Salvadoran Left an alternative to the moderate proposals of the PCS. In the second period (1975–1980), the groups supplemented their earlier techniques with attempts at mass communication through paid advertising, their own radio programs, establishing semilegal newspapers, and actions to disrupt the flow of everyday life. The third period (1980–1992) saw the formation of the FMLN, a coordinated front of political and military opposition. In the context of full-blown civil war, the insurgents adapted by taking control of other tools of mass communication, establishing, for example, clandestine radio stations. At the same time, the FMLN's organizations built international networks to foster solidarity and channel political efforts to governments and institutions outside the country.

Stepping back from the particularities of El Salvador and Guatemala, Lilian Calles Barger's *The World Come of Age* is “an intellectual history of liberation theology” as developed by leading thinkers in the Americas. The author's command over a vast range of intellectual, theological, and historical material enables her to deftly weave three different liberatory traditions—Latin American, Black, and feminist—into a single tapestry. Calles Barger offers a useful criterion for the intellectual historian: “The power of a movement in ideas is its ability to transform the assumptions of the cultural conversation” (260). By this measure, she concludes that “the success of liberation theology lay in challenging the long-held explicit methods and goals of theology, redefining the relationship between religion and politics in a new theo-political space, and altering the expectations for the role of religion in social change rather than legitimation” (260). Liberationists focused attention on the poor and marginalized, on race and social exclusion, and on patriarchy. From the 1960s onward, even those who disagreed with the liberationists—and there were many, ranging from the traditional class of white male theologians to conservative bishops and presidents who directed lethal military force against the Christian base communities from which notions of a God who suffers in history with the oppressed sprang forth—had to engage with their ideas, if only to reject them with bland appeals to “the goodwill of individual action within the confines of an assumed liberal state,” as Richard J. Neuhaus did in 1975 (217).

The World Come of Age should become a touchstone for scholars of liberationist Christianity in the Americas. Calles Barger delimits her study to the 1960s and 1970s while never losing sight of the colonial and republican histories that excluded vast swaths of the populations along lines of class, race, and gender. She reads Gustavo Gutiérrez alongside the African American theologian James Cone and the feminist Rosemary Radford Ruether. Her focus is on the first generation of liberationist thinkers and the social movements that led them to question the theological traditions that they had inherited. Cone, for instance, found that his training in Protestant theology left him with nothing to say as the Black Power movement questioned the structures of a racist society, leading him to forge a new path for Black liberation theology. Liberationists were concerned with tensions, she writes, “between freedom and oppression, immanence and transcendence, and the universal and the particular, as well as the power of ideology to obscure reality” (9). For intellectuals of faith, questioning the concepts of God and love of neighbor that they

had uncritically internalized involved rereading Christian texts in light of the harsh realities of injustice and emerging social scientific research. Such reflection involved a rethinking of the religious status quo in their communities and was spurred by their own participation in social movements that sought to expand human freedom.

Another book that takes a transnational approach is *Caribbean Revolutions*. In this short, readable volume, which will be useful for undergraduate students as well as researchers, Rachel A. May, Alejandro Schneider, and Roberto González Arana examine the impact of the Cuban Revolution on Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Colombia, and Puerto Rico. The success of revolutionaries in Cuba inspired a generation to think that, as Che Guevara argued in *Guerrilla Warfare* (1961), all that was needed to overthrow entrenched dictatorships was grinding poverty coupled with an unyielding belief that a popular insurrection could prevail over a regular army (May, Schneider, and González Arana, 7–8). Such a revolution, Guevara suggested, could be ignited by a small number of armed militants. This idea was known as the “*foco*” strategy of guerrilla warfare, and it became as disastrously influential as it was mythological, based as it was on downplaying the role of an already organized resistance, particularly in urban areas, and on overemphasizing the importance of the nineteen *barbudos*. The Cuban Revolution served as a beacon for the Left, and was equally mobilizing for the anticommunist Right. As the authors note, “the establishment of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Peace Corps, and the Alliance for Progress was tacit recognition of the truth of Guevara’s thesis—poor and marginalized Latin Americans were highly vulnerable to the Marxist-inspired revolutionary message of the Cold War in the years after the Cuban Revolution” (11).

By following the same variables across five national contexts and three decades, *Caribbean Revolutions* enables comparisons between the different structures and alliances, mobilization strategies, and ideological orientations of the armed revolutionary groups (14). For each national case, the authors divide developments into first, second, and sometimes third phases. The first phase typically started in the 1960s, when guerrilla insurgencies began to form, modeling themselves on the 26th of July Movement, which had successfully taken power in Cuba. These loosely organized groups, made up primarily of urban middle- and upper-class militants who went to the countryside to recruit peasants, were quickly routed. As the authors put it, “*foco* theory ultimately proved to be unworkable in the countries where it was attempted” (149). During the second phase, from the late 1960s through the 1970s, insurgents adopted mobilization strategies to broaden their base of political and military support. By the 1980s, armed rebel groups aligned under umbrella organizations and worked to foster constituencies large enough for them to eventually negotiate settlements and transform themselves into peacetime political parties (the FMLN in El Salvador is the emblematic example). The book is blessedly free of a party line, as the authors evaluate the successes and failures of the insurgencies with admirable detachment.

The authors stress that “the impetus for armed rebellion was primarily a nationalist one, especially in Puerto Rico and Nicaragua,” and that guerrillas “were responding to gross social inequalities and historical injustice” (148). They explain how the historical conjuncture of Somoza’s Nicaragua was similar to that of Batista’s Cuba, enabling the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional to become “the armed movement that took power” (63). These struggles took on the hue of the Cold War, as the United States supported brutal anticommunist military dictatorships and as the armed groups that opposed them drew on Marxist analysis to imagine more egalitarian societies. Each chapter is structured in the same way—with the designated historical phases (from the emergence of the guerrillas to their eventual defeat or conquest of power) subdivided into analysis of the internal structures of the armed groups, their mobilization strategies, and the ideological currents characteristic of each phase and organization.

Having explored three different types of violence—ordinary (via Whelan), counter-insurgent (via Falla), and revolutionary (via Cortina Orero and May, Schneider, and González Arana)—let us reconsider the relationship between faith and politics by asking a more fundamental question: Can Christianity in the Americas be cleaved from the colonial violence that brought it here? Theologian Edgardo Colón-Emeric thinks it can be. “The history of Latin America has been written in blood,” he says. “Latin American theologians heard the question of salvation in the voice of blood and responded with a theology of liberation” (25). Liberation theology, we might say, helps Christianity redeem itself.

In Óscar Romero’s *Theological Vision*, Colón-Emeric argues that Romero should be regarded as “a father of the Latin American church” (12). For more than four centuries, the church in Latin America was concerned primarily with transplanting European Christianity into American soil. After World War II, that began to change. With the Bishops’ Conference in Medellín, Gutiérrez’s writings, and Romero’s prophetic ministry, the Latin American church became a source of renewal for Roman Catholic theology. Romero’s pastoral commitments developed as he interpreted “the wellsprings of theology (sacred scripture, the divine liturgy, and the church fathers)” from the margins (19). One key to understanding this process of “*ressourcement* from the periphery” is found in Romero’s reworking of the second-century Greek bishop Irenaeus of Lyons’s dictum *Gloria Dei, vivens homo* (“The glory of God is the living human”) (18). In February 1980, Romero issued his last major theological statement in an address to the faculty and administration of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. He concluded by putting a twist on Irenaeus: “The early Christians used to say, *Gloria Dei, vivens homo*. We can make this concrete by saying, *Gloria Dei, vivens pauper*” (quoted by Colón-Emeric, 20). “The glory of God is the living poor”—this phrase, Colón-Emeric argues, synthesizes Romero’s theological vision and what he has taught the universal church.

Acknowledging the linkage between Christianity and colonial violence, Colón-Emeric writes, “from the beginning, the Church in the Americas had two faces, two voices: the dominant one, represented by soldiers and clerics who justified violence on behalf of evangelization and colonization, and another largely represented by religious who protested these abuses” (34). One face of the church can be seen in the papal bull *Inter Caetera* (1493), which gave the Americas and their Indigenous inhabitants to the Spanish and Portuguese; its other face can be seen in *Sublimis Deus* (1537), which provided a measure of protection for those “outside the faith of Jesus Christ” (34). Along similar lines, the author provides a genealogy of the name El Salvador. He notes that according to one early colonial account, the country was named “in honor of a Spanish victory over the indigenous on August 6, 1526” (61). After highlighting the connection between naming and the European conquest of the Americas, Colón-Emeric persuasively summarizes the historical process: “There is the dominating violence of the period of the conquest that subjugated the indigenous; the usurping violence of the period of independence that privatized communal lands; the social violence of the first half of the twentieth century; the ideologized violence of the second half; and the criminal violence of the twenty-first century” (67).

Although Colón-Emeric acknowledges that Christians were involved in the imperial destruction of Indigenous worlds, he does not grapple with the role that Christianity itself played in underwriting this violence. The Christian/heathen, saved/unsaved, White/Black, friend/enemy binaries that drove the conquest continue to include some by excluding others, with the aim of eventually capturing all for salvation. The author largely ignores the imbrication of Christian narratives, doctrine, and institutions with race-based colonial rule and the expropriation of labor and nonhuman nature.

While I recognize that Colón-Emeric is clearly on the side of a marginalized counter-tradition, I worry about the vestiges of a colonial logic that still haunt his book and, more consequentially, even this most liberatory strand of Christian thought and practice. For

instance, whereas Colón-Emeric follows Romero in reading the Black Christ of Esquipulas as a sign of “how the glory of Christ transfigures colonial history into salvation history” (162), I wonder if it is not precisely by placing *Christ* as the agent of transfiguration that colonial violence can be replicated. To invoke Robert Allen Warrior in his reading of the Exodus stories through Canaanite eyes, “The peasants of Solentiname bring a wisdom and experience previously unknown to Christian theology, but I do not see what mechanism guarantees that they—or any other people who seek to be shaped and molded by reading the text—will differentiate between the liberating god and the god of conquest.”⁶ Christianity always threatens to unmake the worlds of those who worship other gods. Indeed, my point is that it *has* unmade those worlds. The old theological seeds of Christian violence against non-Christians lie dormant in statements such as “Divinization is always Christocentric” (237). Why isn’t divinization always Allahcentric? Or Krishnacentric? Or Ixchelcentric?

One problem that fuels this forgetting is the one-sided notion of persecution that Christianity often assumes. Colón-Emeric writes: “persecution brings together the face of the broken church and the face of the broken Christ” (167). Fathers Alfonso Navarro, Óscar Romero, and Ignacio Ellacuría, along with tens of thousands of lesser-known Salvadorans, were persecuted by their fellow Christians for attempting to make love of neighbor meaningful in a violently unequal society. But they are the exception that proves the rule. Christians have persecuted non-Christians (and other Christians) from the conquest to the present. Notwithstanding the countertradition from Bartolomé de las Casas to Óscar Romero, Christianity provided the ideological infrastructure for the construction and maintenance of violently hierarchical societies, blessing the expropriations of Indigenous and African peoples and securing white European domination over nonhuman nature. There is a logic to Christianity in which the true Christian is always the victim and never the victimizer (Matt. 5:10). This only enables the faithful in the present to have it both ways, distorting their relationship to their past by claiming as their own the “good” Christians, like Romero, while disavowing the “bad” ones, like Pedro de Alvarado, as conquerors or Christians with a distorted theology. I worry about such distortions and disavowals, because they blind Christians to their past, to their present, and thus to themselves. In thinking about Romero, we must attend to Christianity’s own contribution to the violence that he fell victim to. We must examine how the Indigenous communities of Mesoamerica are like the Canaanites and the ways that the Divino Salvador del Mundo was established and maintained through ongoing acts of violent dispossession. When Christianity disavows its culpability for these crimes, a peculiarly Christian form of historical amnesia abets new forms of exclusion and domination.

Unlike Whelan and Colón-Emeric, Michael R. Candelaria is not a normative insider. In *The Latino Christ in Art, Literature, and Liberation Theology*, Candelaria takes a religious studies approach, treating “theology and philosophy as types of literature” (4). As a historian and an agnostic, I expected myself to be more sympathetic to his readings of works by Salvador Dalí, Fray Angélico Chávez, José Clemente Orozco, Miguel de Unamuno, Jorge Luis Borges, and Richard Rojas than to Whelan and Colón-Emeric’s theological arguments. But as I read on, I increasingly resisted the anti-metaphysical articles of faith through which Candelaria sought to understand the figure of “Christ in Latina/o art and literature” (4). The author is open about his approach: “Two regulative ideas apply methodologically to construct a heuristic framework for interpretation. First, representations of Jesus/Christ result from projections of human self-understanding. Second, images of Jesus/Christ express some ideal or idea” (5). Well, okay, as far as things go, I might tentatively agree with Candelaria on both of these claims. But is that all there is to it, projections and ideals?

⁶ Robert Allen Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today,” *Christianity and Crisis* 49, no. 12 (1989): 264.

At the very least, the devout experience the holy as if it were real. Hence a social history of how believers engage with images of Latino Christs would require a suspension of judgment on the reality of the gods to figure out what they are up to in the lives of those who pray to them.

Having surveyed the origins of revolutionary movements, it is appropriate to consider what happened next. That is the project that anthropologist Ralph Sprenkels took up in a comprehensive ethnographic study of the transition that political-military organizations made to electoral politics in postwar El Salvador. Sprenkels did not phone this one in. Rather, *After Insurgency* was, at the risk of exaggerating, the project of his life. In 1990, Sprenkels was studying in Guadalajara, Mexico, and got involved with El Salvador's revolutionary movement through the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (FPL). After the signing of the peace accords in 1992, the FPL transferred him to El Salvador, where he worked in Chaletenango on "fundraising, propaganda, education, and research into the human-rights violations perpetrated by the military and the death squads during the war" (5). He lived in El Salvador for a total of fifteen years, and many of the eighty-nine former militants whom he interviewed for this book were old friends. Less than eighteen months after the publication of *After Insurgency*, Sprenkels suffered a massive heart attack and died a week later. He was fifty years old.

In *After Insurgency*, Sprenkels convincingly argues that "the networks and the political imaginaries that the insurgents built before and during the war continued to be of great importance to postwar personal and collective destinies, in spite of strong postinsurgent disillusionment" (12). The disillusionment felt by rank-and-file militants stemmed from the gap between the notions of equality for which they sacrificed during the war and the realities of privilege and opportunity that former guerrilla commanders enjoyed once they became party leaders after the war. One of Sprenkels's informants told him that "the revolutionary energy that existed before" was now just an image: "it's an image that allows you to sell yourself" (181). As the FMLN converted its insurgent networks into a political machine, a factional clientelism emerged such that party leaders could distribute projects and favors. Sprenkels challenges explanations of the "reintegration" and "empowerment" of rural insurgents as well as a focus on neoliberalism as the determinative factor in the failure of development projects. Instead, he emphasizes the myriad ways that the revolutionary political-military organizations themselves were complicit in generating the inequalities that structure the repopulations to this day.

Sprenkels reaches this conclusion by chronicling the Salvadoran insurgency in chapter 2 and then proceeding, in five subsequent chapters, to follow the return of insurgents to civilian life and their involvement in electoral politics. While some scholars argue that peasants built their own revolutionary organizations, and others have insisted that a faction of the urban middle and upper classes defied the military by opting for armed rebellion, Sprenkels rejects both bottom-up and top-down explanations and regards these competing attempts to explain the sustaining force of the revolutionary movement as incomplete (31).⁷ Instead, he offers "a relational account" that tracks how various actors and subgroups played different roles at different times. He is especially attentive to the ways that the very circumstances under which the political military organizations operated generated the distrust and disillusionment that many rank-and-file militants felt after the insurgency. "The magnitude of the revolutionary endeavor," he argues, "the bonding and the enormous investment of resourcefulness and human energy, the dreams that were shared—and often left unfulfilled—the losses of lives of comrades and friends, the strains of war and clandestinity, the internal power struggles and betrayals, all made significant

⁷ For further discussion of the diverging emphasis—either on an autonomous peasantry or on leadership from the cities—see Erik Ching, "The Popular Church and Revolutionary Insurgency in El Salvador," *Latin American Research Review* 53, no. 4 (2018): 876–885.

contributions to this communal experience of insurgency” (77). After 1984, insurgents pursued a strategy of “*doble cara*,” enabling them to organize outside liberated zones and to build support networks in Europe, the United States, and Canada. The proliferation of civil-political front groups in the period leading up to the 1992 peace negotiations facilitated the transition from armed insurgency to participation in electoral politics.

In one of the most interesting chapters, Sprenkels employs a new method, which he calls “group portrait-based life-story reconstruction,” to trace the most common postwar trajectories of former guerrillas (194). Here we meet Federico, “an old friend and an ex-combatant who had come out of the war with numerous scars and one glass eye” (188). Federico showed Sprenkels a photograph of his unit. Together, the two reconstructed the postinsurgency life trajectories of each person in that image: “We were able to identify all the fighters except one, and we mapped out nineteen different trajectories, spanning more than two decades and several countries, all captured in one single photograph” (192). In 2009, they figured out that one person in the photo was working for the FMLN in San Vicente; another had been “war-wounded” and ran a transportation service to an FMLN settlement; another had migrated to Canada and worked with a landscaping company; another had become a police officer; and four of the twenty people in the picture had migrated to the United States after the war (191). But this information only skims the surface of what Sprenkels gleaned from these photo-based life-history interviews. The photos also elicited rich conversations and intense emotions, transporting the photographed subjects back in time. Whereas guerrilla commanders wrote memoirs and often transitioned smoothly from being insurgents to taking up positions within the postinsurgency political party, rank-and-file militants often struggled to reintegrate, making it difficult to get an objective understanding of what happened to them after the peace accords. By selecting eleven photographs of groups of guerrilla fighters from the collections of the main political military organizations and then tracking down every person in those pictures, Sprenkels traced “what had happened to ‘real’ guerrilla fighters after the war” (195). Using this method, he was able to establish how interpersonal ties forged within the political military organizations during the years of insurgency continued to be important in the former insurgents’ later sociopolitical and economic lives.

Reflecting back on these ten books, I am aware of my own ambivalent responses to the key questions they raise, finding myself neither in heaven nor firmly rooted in the earth. There are, I think, two conclusions that we can reach after surveying these very different studies.

The first is that we need research on what these books are not. We now have rich historical and ethnographic literatures on progressive Catholicism, on the one hand, and the revolutionary movements, on the other. What we sorely lack are studies of right-wing Christianity and the counterrevolutionary groups in Central America. The liberationists represented a small but important segment of the Christian faithful. Research needs to be done on the reactionary priests, bishops, and lay groups that demonized Romero, progressive Christianity, the Christian base communities, and the Jesuits. We need to study the relationships between right-wing Catholics and evangelical Christians, to trace their international networks, and to figure out how they interfaced with the military dictatorships and the death squads. What, furthermore, were the specific ties between agrarian capitalists and conservative Christians?

The second major issue that these books raise, at least for me, is that we must ask whether Christianity can ever shed its history as a violent imposition in the Americas. Of all the authors, perhaps Falla is best positioned to help us answer this question. As a Jesuit and an anthropologist who contributed to the revolutionary current of liberation theology, Falla worked at the limits of what the church would allow. He also worked at the limits of what Catholic orthodoxy would permit. His invocation of Nahual, a companion spirit that sometimes comes in the form of a nonhuman animal, would

be considered by many to be heretical. What I would have liked most from Falla, and what might have responded to the questions provoked by Colón-Emeric's account of a Salvadoran theology of transfiguration, was a chapter in which he attempted to retrospectively assess his pastorate of accompaniment. Such an assessment would not be to judge the past—that is over. It would be to help us figure out our options for the future.

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