

for forgiveness in order to be the Church. It is only the people who recognise that they would, and do murder, and are murdering the prophets, the indians, the slaves, who can receive forgiveness from their victims, and thus have the equanimity to preach the Gospel of the forgiving victim. Until our complicity in the *mauvaise* conscience of creole society is assumed, the accusation of Huancavelica, of Potosí, of untold deaths “antes del tiempo” produced by our covetousness, will toll like a deep, uncomfortable bell, unable to be laid to rest, in our theology, in our Gospel, in the life of the Church. No Liberation without complicity, no freedom without assuming our past. This will not re-found the Church in those countries, but it will bring us back to the one foundation, that of the forgiving murdered one, that must be rediscovered by any age or people or culture who would be Catholic.

- 1 The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots and the Liberal State, 1492 to 1867 by D.A. Brading, Cambridge University Press 1991. Pp xviii + 761. £55.00.
- 2 Criollo in Spanish has the sense of ‘born in America’; in Portuguese, however, Crioulo is largely synonymous with black, and used as a friendly term of abuse among people who are black, or of black mixture (about 50% of the population of Brazil). I have used it throughout in its Spanish American sense.
- 3 Brading *The Origins of Mexican Nationalism* Cambridge 1985.

Accents in Theology

Francis McDonagh

More than in the case of any other school of theology, it is important to assess liberation theology in its social context. Liberation theology not only asserts a necessary correlation between belief and action; its adherents are also normally active in work with poor communities or one of the many church-linked sectoral support organisations. Liberation theology has also acquired wide influence within the magisterium of the Latin American church: the meeting of the General Conference of Latin American bishops (CELAM) in Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979) adopted key concepts, and for the past twenty years a liberationist outlook has shaped the thinking of the Brazilian bishops’ conference, the largest on the continent.

The impact of liberation theology in the Latin American church has been profound, though not universal. Where its ideas have been adopted, the church, from being in alliance with the elites and out of touch with the

masses in a rapidly urbanising society, has acquired a new social relevance and a new following among the poor, and is treated with a new seriousness by non-Christian radicals. Bishops, who formerly entered the political arena mainly to defend their privileges, now commonly champion the rights of workers, the landless, indigenous peoples and other oppressed groups¹ There has been an explosion of creativity, not only in theology, but in church structure, pastoral practice and liturgy. Liberation theology's influence has spread beyond Latin America, stimulating similar contextual theologies in other parts of the Third World, and securing recognition of one of its key concepts, the 'preferential option for the poor', as an essential element of papal social teaching and a permanent question for Christians in the affluent world.²

Social Context

What is the social context of liberation theology? It is, primarily, one of poverty, but poverty experienced by Christian people increasingly using a new analytical framework for reflecting on faith and society. The origin of liberation theology is conventionally dated to a meeting in Chimbote, Peru, in July 1968, a few months before the Latin American bishops' meeting at Medellín. The Medellín meeting was a Latin American response to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), although the currents which emerged in it, like liberation theology itself, were generated as part of the worldwide changes after the Second World War, in particular the aspirations for the freedom in the name of which the postwar settlement was baptised. In Latin America the 1960s were marked by the triumph of the Cuban revolution (1959) and the perceived failure of the US development programme, the Alliance for Progress. The Cuban revolution appeared to offer a model for success, and radical transformation of society seemed the only alternative to the 'development' which the Latin American elites refused to countenance.

It is important not to stop the story there. There is a tendency to characterise liberation theology as a typical sixties phenomenon, romantic but unrealistic. Such a view could only come from the northern hemisphere. Gustavo Gutiérrez remarks that 1968 was anything but a time of euphoria. The dictator Somoza was still in power in Nicaragua, Papa Doc in Haiti and Brazil was passing through the most brutal period of the military dictatorship, which began in 1964. The Allende government in Chile was overthrown in 1973. In some respects the 1980s saw progress. Brazil moved in two stages from dictatorship to free elections by 1989. Chile returned to civilian rule in 1990. In Central America, however, violence against the poor intensified. The death toll in El Salvador's civil war reached 80,000 by the end of 1990, and in Nicaragua a US-imposed economic embargo and a US-financed guerrilla war wore away the Sandinista support base, and led to their defeat in the 1990 elections. But political change, whether towards popular power or away from it, made little difference to the conditions of most people. World recession and neoliberal economic policies lowered

living standards for the poor in most of Latin America. The aspects of Latin American life that gave liberation theology validity as Christian reflection on experience remain. The fall of institutional Marxism in Eastern Europe and its fall from favour in Western academic circles have only marginal relevance to the Latin American church, though opponents of liberation theology have seized on them for propaganda purposes.

Marxism

Arthur McGovern, author of one of the most comprehensive surveys of liberation theology, summed up the influence of Marxism in liberation theology as follows:

If one considers a broad range of liberation theologians writing in the 1970s, Marxism does not feature as the dominant influence. None of the 13 representatives of essays in *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America* speaks of Marxist analysis as essential. José Comblin consistently criticised Marxist models of socialism and rejected even the use of Marxist analysis. Juan Luis Segundo used only a few highly nuanced points from Marxism; Jon Sobrino, Segundo Galilea, Carlos Mesters and many other liberation theologians bear little relation to Marxism. Even in the first years of liberation theology biblical sources, not Marxism, remained primary (*The Tablet*, 15 September 1990).

In his book on liberation theology, McGovern noted the prevalence of Marxist ideas among Latin American social reformers, to whom ideas such as the exploitation of surplus value and imperialism seemed too obvious to need critical scrutiny.⁴ Many of the church attacks on the 'Marxism' of liberation theology, he comments, have focused on movements such as the Chilean Christians for Socialism, but 'most liberation theologians have clearly distinguished their version of a just society from the Marxist-Leninist socialism of Eastern Europe' (*Tablet*, *ibid.*). McGovern argues repeatedly that the relevance of Marxism has been exaggerated:

Controversy over issues about Marxism, social analysis and political readings of scripture has created a distorted image of liberation theology. In terms of quantity, especially if one examines liberation theology in the 1980s, writings about liberation spirituality far outweigh works in all the areas that arouse debate. I would clearly designate spirituality as the dominant theme of contemporary liberation theology [*Liberation Theology and its Critics*] p. 83].

A church renewed

Vitality, creativity and an absence of bitterness are some of the main impressions observers bring back from the 'church of the poor' in Latin America, nothing like the conservative caricature of Christian life reduced to one-dimensional political activism. Oscar Romero is one of the best examples of the complex process. From having conventional Salvadorean

middle-class prejudices about subversion and marxism, he was changed by his contact with the base communities, and a turning point came with the murder of his friend, the priest Rutilio Grande, in 1977.³ Nonetheless, whilst he became more and more outspoken in condemnation of atrocities, and more critical of the oligarchy and the government, to the point of justifying insurrection if all else failed, he retained many aspects of conventional piety, with a genius for reinterpreting them from a liberation perspective. One example is a sermon he preached about the scapular, on the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in 1977:

When the church demands a more just society, wealth better shared, more respect for human rights, the church is not meddling in politics or becoming marxist and Communist. The church is telling people what the scapular says: only those will be saved who can use the things of earth with the heart of God.⁴

This use of popular piety goes some way to refuting the view that liberation theology is really progressive European theology transplanted to Latin America. Some of the best examples of this are the use of the bible in poor communities. Carlos Mesters, a specialist in the field, quotes the following reflection on Acts 12.1-17:

When Dom Pedro Casaldáliga was a prisoner in his house, no one knew. There was no means of communication. Seven well-armed police officers kept watch at the house and refused to let anyone enter or leave. Exactly like Peter's prison in the Bible. But a young girl went in. No one took any notice of her. She was an ordinary girl, in cheap flip-flops. She took a note from Dom Pedro out of the prison, went straight to the airstrip, got a lift to Goiânia and told the bishops who were meeting there. They got busy and got Dom Pedro freed. The girl was the angel of God who made the gates of Peter's prison swing open!⁷

There is also a steadily increasing volume of academic exegesis from a liberation perspective, focusing for understandable reasons on the social context of the texts, and also attempting to recover the role of dominated groups such as women.⁸

Liberation theology has given rise to an abundance of liturgies and devotional materials. One of the best known is the Nicaraguan Misa Campesina, by Carlos Mejía Godoy, which opens with a celebration of the mediation of Christ the worker:

You are the God of the poor,
The down-to-earth human God,
God who sweats in the street,
God with a sunburnt face.

That's why I can talk to you
the language my own people talk,
because God you're a worker too

Christ you're a working man.'

One of the favourite songs of the Brazilian base communities is called 'Utopia':

When the day of peace dawns again,
When the sun of hope shines,
When the people in the streets start to smile
and the roses bloom,
I shall be singing.

Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga has written a hymn to the black Virgin Aparecida, which is an anthem for the growing sense of pride among black Brazilians, and many other songs celebrate the struggle for justice and the solidarity of the communities:

The people of God marched towards the promised land,
Moses at their head,
but Moses is not dead
We are Moses when against oppression we stand.¹⁰

Poor and believing

These features of church life in Latin America reinforce Gustavo Gutiérrez' contention that liberation theology reflects the unique situation of Latin America's majority as both poor and believing, Christian and oppressed. In his 1988 introduction to the revised version of *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez defined liberation theology as 'an expression of the right of the poor to think out their own faith'.¹¹ It is the result of the 'new presence of those who in the past were always absent from our history', of the 'irruption of the poor'. Liberation theology thus implies a shift in the locus of theologising, or at least of the primary reference: 'Because liberation theology takes a critical approach, it refuses to serve as a Christian justification for positions already taken. It seeks to show that unless we make an ongoing commitment to the poor, who are the privileged members of the reign of God, we are far removed from the Christian message' (p. xxxiii). As Gutiérrez observes, 'some have felt their interests adversely affected'. It is often hard to decide whether criticisms of liberation theology are political rather than theological, or at least based on a socially conditioned inability to understand what the other side is saying. McGovern remarks that criticism of liberation theology is often based on what a critic 'sees implied' in a text rather than on what it states.¹² Political differences have certainly been one element in the controversy within the church about liberation theology. Politically motivated denunciations from within the church, from his fellow bishops among others, were a constant problem for Archbishop Romero in his relations with the Vatican.¹³ The continuance of such divisions in the church in El Salvador was dramatically illustrated when the President of the

Salvadorean bishops' conference, Bishop Romeo Tovar Astorga, flew to Rome to assure the Pope that the Jesuits murdered at the Central American University in November 1989 had been killed by leftwing terrorists, just as the Salvadorean President was admitting army involvement. In relation to Brazil, too, false accusations in 1989 that the church's Pastoral Land Commission was encouraging peasants to use violence seem to have originated with a conservative Brazilian bishop. In view of the continued prestige of the church in Latin America, church backing for threatened groups may give a measure of security, and its withdrawal may leave them exposed to harassment or outright violence and murder. Leonardo Boff argues that the legitimization liberation theology gives to the struggles of the poor explains the bitter hatred of some right-wing Catholics: 'They don't accept that the "option for the poor and against their poverty" should derive from the heart of the Christian faith and the essence of the very biblical concept of God. They would like it to derive from Marxism and left-wing ideologies. This is the incomprehension and calumny which the Roman doctrinal authorities are propagating around the world.'¹⁴

Not all liberation theologians would use such sharp words, but there is no mistaking the range of feelings, going from sadness through bitterness to anger, felt by theologians and pastors at the constant pressure from Rome, which seems to them to imply an unfraternal lack of trust, and even a belittling of their ecclesial status. These tensions were highlighted by the closure in 1989 of the regional seminary and theological institute in Recife, in the diocese where Helder Câmara had been archbishop until 1985. The theological institute, where seminarians studied alongside lay men and women, and lived in small communities in parishes, represented an attempt to relate the formation of future priests to the lives of the communities they were destined to serve, in a way which Rome has viewed with suspicion in various parts of Brazil. Typical of the ambiguity which surrounds such measures, the closure was ordered by the Congregation for Catholic Education, even though the Apostolic Visitor who inspected the institutions in 1988 was widely reported as having given a favourable verdict. Around the same time the archbishop of Olinda and Recife, Dom José Cardoso Sobrinho, dismissed the justice and peace commission and the staffs of various pastoral agencies, and took action against progressive priests. In a local theologian's view, 'The institutional structure at the service of the Church of the Poor was almost completely dismantled.'¹⁵ In this view these actions were part of a general attempt to bring base communities back into a pyramidal structure of the church, bishop-priest-laity, and make them components of the parish instead of

a new way of being church which involves all its members (bishops, priests, religious men and women), inserted in the people's environment; which includes all the dimensions of ecclesiality, the prophetic, kingly and priestly mission of Christ, and integrates and articulates all the various pastoral expressions of the Church of the Poor...around its institutional base, the base community.'¹⁶

Part of this strategy, according to its critics, is the encouragement of 'transnational, spiritualising' movements such as the charismatics, Focolarini, Opus Dei and Schönstatt, whose compartmentalised approach reflects the style of the urban middle class, as opposed to the integrated, inculturated faith life of the base communities. The emphasis on the 'movements' goes with 'mass evangelisation' techniques, including radio and television campaigns, to counter the appeal of the pentecostal churches. Supporters of the base communities argue that the only way to reach the very poor, the *miseráveis*, the people who have become detached from community structures, street children, people with AIDS, in a way that goes beyond superficial spiritual uplift, is for the base communities themselves to become missionary, and there are signs that this is beginning to happen.

This awareness that 'the church of the poor' has so far reached only a minority of the poor in Latin America will be one of the main focuses of debate at the next General Conference of Latin American Bishops, CELAM IV, to be held in Santo Domingo in 1992. In an atmosphere more than usually charged by the coincidence of the meeting in time and place with the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival on the American continent, the critics of liberation theology will argue that its stress on social commitment has proved unattractive to the poor, who are turning instead to the sects, and call for a more 'spiritual' approach. The liberationists will argue instead for a greater inculturation of the gospel in the complexity of the world of the poor, with greater attention being paid to the various groups within it, black people, indigenous peoples, women, rural communities as opposed to urban. This is a very strong theme of Gustavo Gutiérrez' current writings. He appeals to the model of Pentecost, where the miracle was not that the apostles all spoke the same language but that their hearers understood them 'all of us in our own native language' (Acts 2.6-8). 'Authentic universality,' he argues, 'does not consist in speaking precisely the same language, but rather in achieving a full understanding within the setting of each language.'¹ That this may involve conflict, and what sort of conflict this may be, he expresses with his characteristic gentle irony in what may prove to be a script for Santo Domingo:

Our theological language...takes its colouring from our peoples, cultures and racial groupings, and yet we use it in an attempt to proclaim the universality of God's love. This accent may not be to the liking of those who until now have regarded themselves as the proprietors of theology and are not conscious of their own accent (to which, of course, they have every right) when they speak of God.²

- 1 To take a few examples: *A Choice for Panama* (1981, on the Cerro Colorado copper mine project), *The Option for the Poor*, (1982, the bishops of Santiago de Chile), *Peasants and Land* (1983, the bishops of Paraguay), all in the CIIR series *Church in the World*. The Brazilian bishops' conference Fraternity campaign has dealt with abandoned children, landlessness, racism, the rights of workers.
- 2 See, for example, Albert Nolan OP, *God in South Africa*, David Philip, Claremont, Mambo Press, Zimbabwe, CIIR, (London, Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1988); Ed de

- la Torre, *Touching Ground, Taking Root*, Socio-Pastoral Institute, Quezon City, CIIR and the British Council of Churches, London 1986; Marc. H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (ed.), *The Future of Liberation Theology, Essays in Honour of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll NY, 1989, Part V; John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 42; *Centesimus Annus*, 57; *New Blackfriars*, February 1988, special issue on 'The Church's Option for the Poor in Britain'.
- 3 There is a convenient summary in Scott Mainwaring and Alexander Wilde (ed.), *The Progressive Church in Latin America*, Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1989, pp. 1–37.
 - 4 Arthur F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and its Critics*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 1989, 158–59.
 - 5 See James R. Brockman (ed.), *The Word Remains: A Life of Oscar Romero*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll NY, 1982, pp. 8–18; Pablo Galdámez, *The Faith of a People*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll NY, and CIIR, London 1986.
 - 6 Quoted in James R. Brockman (ed.), *The Word Remains: A Life of Oscar Romero*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll NY, 1982, pp. 65–67.
 - 7 *Defenseless Flower. A New Reading of the Bible*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll NY, and CIIR, London, 1989, pp. 3–4. Mesters compares the attitude of the Latin American poor to that of the church Fathers; see pp. 22–32. See also James Pitt, *Good News to All*, CAFOD, London, 1989.
 - 8 See, for example, Ana Flora Anderson and Gilberto da Silva Gorgulho OP, 'Miriam and Her Companions', Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (ed.), *The Future of Liberation Theology*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll NY 1989, pp. 205–19. See also Maria Clara Bingemer, *ibid.*, pp. 483–85.
 - 9 Translation by Dinah Livingstone, *Nicaraguan Mass*, CIIR London 1986.
 - 10 Translated from the song sheet of the Seventh Inter-Ecclesial Meeting of Base Communities, Duque de Caxias, Rio de Janeiro, 1989.
 - 11 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll NY and SCM Press, London, 1988, p. xxi.
 - 12 *Liberation Theology and its Critics*, p. 60.
 - 13 See Brockman, *The Word Remains*, pp. 101–03, 151–56
 - 14 Leonardo Boff, 'Teología de la liberación, opción por los pobres y socialismo hoy', José María Vigil (ed.), *Sobre la Opción por los Pobres*, Editorial Nicarao, Managua 1991, pp. 115–22.
 - 15 Roberto van der Ploeg, 'A Igreja dos Pobres no Nordeste', *Cadernos do CEAS* 132 (Mar/Apr 1991), pp. 61–70, quotation from p. 64.
 - 16 Van der Ploeg, p. 66.
 - 17 *A Theology of Liberation*, op. cit., p. xxxvi.
 - 18 *ibid.*, p. xxxv.