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Latin American Liberation Theology: Moment, Movement, Legacy

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Latin American Liberation Theology: Moment, Movement, Legacy

DAVID TOMBS

The year 1968 was a decisive *moment* in the emergence of liberation theology in Latin America. Between May and August of this remarkable year, three different meetings (in Rio de Janeiro, Chimbote and Medellín) helped a significant section of the traditionally very conservative Catholic Church in Latin America to embrace a new agenda for social justice. During the 1970s and 1980s the theological *movement*, which grew out of these meetings, attracted international attention and was widely acclaimed in progressive theological circles for its methodological innovations and theological insights.¹

This movement, which came to be known as liberation theology, should be understood in terms of at least three distinctive periods – development, maturation, and crisis – which are more or less coincidental with the next three decades (the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s). The term ‘movement’ is an apposite one for understanding liberation theology during these decades for at least two reasons. First, because liberation theology was never a static theology, it was a *dynamic movement* in the sense of an evolving process, which grew, changed and transformed itself. Second, because liberation theology was not just an intellectual movement expressed in ideas or doctrines, it was also a significant *social movement* in which its

1 There is now an extensive literature on Latin American liberation theology, its significance beyond Latin America and criticisms raised against it; see especially A.F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and its Critics: Towards an Assessment* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989).

transformative vision was incarnated in practical action and organisation. Liberation theology did not just exist in people's heads and on printed pages in libraries; it existed as an organised movement within both the church and wider society.²

As a movement liberation theology reached its peak in the 1970s and 1980s. The 1990s presented a crisis for what had gone before, and raised questions on the future of liberation theology. Hostile critics proclaimed the 1990s as the final end of liberation theology. Proponents and sympathisers were more likely to speak in terms of 'change' or 'transition' but largely agreed that an important period was coming to a close.

Today, forty years on from 1968, individual theologians and communities in Latin America continue to positively identify themselves with liberation theology. However, rather than limiting liberation theology's current significance to an argument over the number of current advocates, a more fruitful assessment of its importance probably lies in assessing its potential *legacy* for the twenty-first century? Even though the terminology of 'liberation' now has many difficulties, and Latin American liberation theology seems to have reached the end of an era as a cohesive theological movement, nonetheless many of liberation theology's insights will be valuable guides for any Christian theology that is to offer a prophetic social witness in the future.³ To appreciate this potential legacy, it is helpful to understand the ground-breaking developments initiated by liberation theology in the

2 For a more detailed treatment of these ideas, see David Tombs, *Latin American Liberation Theology* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2002). Alfred Hennelly has published many of the most significant source materials on liberation theology in chronological order in A.T. Hennelly (ed.), *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990).

3 The presentation here is intentionally restricted to Latin American liberation theology. This is not to suggest that Latin America has a monopoly on the term 'liberation theology', or that other liberation theologies, which emerged in other contexts – Black liberation theology, feminist liberation theology, Asian liberation theology, African liberation theology – have all followed a similar course. Each of these contextual theologies has faced different social challenges and developed in its own distinctive way, as shown in other contributions to this collection.

moment of 1968, and the subsequent transformations that occurred in the liberation theology movement in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

The Moment: 1968

Vatican II (1962–65) introduced sweeping reforms into the church and re-orientated its relationship to the world. The new social emphasis in documents like *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) encouraged the church in Latin America to embrace the poor as its special concern at three separate meetings between May and August in 1968. In so doing, progressive voices in the Latin American church drew upon and developed ideas that dated back at least as far as the very first Catholic social encyclical (Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* in 1891).

Rerum Novarum recognised that 'the poor and helpless have a claim to special consideration' by civil authorities.⁴ John XXIII had recently restated the same principle of special consideration in *Pacem in Terris* (1963). Prior to the 1960s the church had seen the defence of these rights as the responsibility of the civil authorities. The church's own role had been restricted to charity rather than justice. After Vatican II, social justice for the poor was also to be a core concern for the church and integral to its mission. The urgency of this task was reiterated in Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (1967). Where civil authorities failed to heed their responsibility to the poor, then the church would need to take up their cause. Catholic social teaching along these lines prepared the way for the church in Latin America to make their distinctive commitment to the poor during 1968.

4 *Rerum Novarum*, § 29.

Rio de Janeiro – May 1968

Pedro Arrupe SJ (the Father General of the Society of Jesus) met with all the Jesuit Provincials in Latin America in Rio de Janeiro in May 1968. Arrupe was committed to the needs of the poor and an enthusiastic advocate for changes in the Society. The Jesuit provincials discussed the social problems of Latin America, and pledged to make them the ‘absolute priority in our apostolic strategy’.⁵ A summarised version of their discussion was sent to every member of the Society and they called on all members of the Order to make the profound changes that were necessary for this conversion to happen.

The recognition of past failures and the need for conversion and new direction was stressed in a number of places. For example:

We are aware of the profound transformation this presupposes. We must break with some of our attitudes in the past to re-establish ties with our humanist tradition: ‘The human being fully alive is the glory of God’ (Saint Irenaeus). We want to avoid any attitude of isolation or domination that may have been ours in the past. We want to adopt an attitude of service to the church and to society, rejecting the overtones of power that have been attributed to us.... We are counting on you as we undertake this effort to divest ourselves of any aristocratic attitude that may have been present in our public positions, in our style of life, in the selection of our audience, in our dealings with lay co-workers, and in our relations with the wealthy classes.⁶

The letter concludes: ‘In this way, hopefully, the Society of Jesus in Latin America will be able to undergo the necessary conversion with God’s grace.’⁷

The Jesuits were careful to distance themselves from party politics or any power in civil society. Nonetheless, their talk of *oppression and liberation* (not poverty and development) reflected the shift taking place in radical sectors of the church at the time. For example, they promised that ‘in all

5 ‘The Jesuits of Latin America,’ § 3; reprinted in Hennelly (ed.), *Liberation Theology*, 77–83.

6 ‘The Jesuits of Latin America,’ § 3.

7 ‘The Jesuits of Latin America,’ § 11.

our activities, our goal should be the liberation of humankind from every sort of servitude that oppresses it'.⁸

Chimbote – July 1968

Two months later, in July 1968, the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez gave a talk to a meeting of priests and laity at Chimbote, Peru. His paper, entitled 'Towards a Theology of Liberation', gave a clear statement of two key features that would define the methodology and focus of the movement.⁹

Firstly, Gutiérrez argued that the church should understand theology as critical reflection on prior commitment. Gutiérrez argued that 'theology is a reflection – that is, it is a second act, a turning back, a re-flecting, that comes after action. Theology is not first; the commitment is first. Theology is the understanding of the commitment, and the commitment is action'.¹⁰ Gutiérrez's methodological approach was in line with approach of *Gaudium et Spes*, in as much as it took the state of the world as the starting point for reflection rather than doctrinal presuppositions. However, Gutiérrez also went beyond this. He identified commitment and action – not just social issues – as the most important focus. Gutiérrez argued that theology should not stand apart from the objects of its reflections. Rather, Christians should participate in social transformation and reflect on their involvement in this active process. Theological reflection should be undertaken from within the process and contribute to the process. It should not just be an external judgement on society. The dynamic engagement transformed the pastoral circle into a more radical model for change that pre-supposed commitment and involved analysis, reflection and action.

8 'The Jesuits of Latin America', § 3.

9 Gustavo Gutiérrez, 'Toward a Theology of Liberation', in Hennelly (ed.), *Liberation Theology*, 62–76. For a good overview and assessment of Gutiérrez's work, see R.M. Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez: An Introduction to Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990).

10 Gutiérrez, 'Toward a Theology of Liberation', 63.

The paper's other key contribution was to develop the idea of 'liberation' as a key term and theological theme. Others in Latin America had already started to use 'liberation' as a political alternative to development, but Gutiérrez's contribution was to show its value and validity as a theological term. His analysis of liberation as a term for integral salvation in the framework of post-Vatican II theology was a creative and bold theological statement. He made frequent references to the recently published *Populorum Progressio* and argued that what Paul VI called 'integral development' might be better conceptualised in terms of 'liberation'. The language of liberation was ideally suited to the revolutionary context of the late 1960s and was a rich and inspirational term for theology. It was not surprising that this new movement quickly came to be known by the name 'liberation theology'.¹¹

CELAM II at Medellín – August 1968

At the end of Vatican II, the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) decided to hold a major follow-up to discuss the implications of Vatican II for their continent.¹² In the first half of 1968 the preparatory work for the conference, scheduled for August 1968 at Medellín (Colombia), was well under way. The position papers were developed by a steering

- 11 Gutiérrez served as a theological adviser at Medellín, and in the aftermath of the conference he continued to reflect on the new direction being taken by the church. The following year he gave a revised version of his Chimbote paper at a conference in Cartigny (Switzerland).
- 12 CELAM is commonly used to designate both the Conference of Latin American bishops as an organisational body and their general conferences. CELAM (the organisation) was set up at a meeting in 1955 in Rio de Janeiro at a conference now referred to as CELAM I. The conference at Medellín is widely known as CELAM II. The other two general conferences are CELAM III (Puebla, Mexico, 1979) and CELAM IV (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, 1992). In addition to the major conferences (sometimes called 'extraordinary' meetings), CELAM also meets annually for 'ordinary' meetings. It was the annual meeting in 1965 (held in Rome during Vatican II) that led to second general conference at Medellín.

committee, which was composed largely of moderates and progressives at Bogotá in January 1968. Further CELAM-sponsored conferences took place in April at Melgar, Colombia (on the church's mission) and in May at Itapuã, Brazil (on the church and social change). These preliminary meetings prepared the way for the Medellín Conference to be the single most important church event for the development of liberation theology as an effective social movement with a political commitment to justice.¹³ Not all the documents from Medellín reflected this commitment with the same strength and consistency, but it came out strongly in the *Message to the Peoples of Latin America*, the *Document on Justice*, the *Document on Peace*, and the *Document on the Poverty of the Church*. In these four documents, the church made a commitment to the poor that had at least three key features of long-term significance.¹⁴

First, they denounced injustice and defended the poor as an integral part of Christian mission. In the *Document on Justice* the bishops committed the church to assisting the poor and serving as their advocates, and they promised that 'The church – the people of God – will lend its support to the downtrodden of every social class so that they might come to know their rights and how to make use of them.'¹⁵ Recognising and naming the suffering of the poor as injustice rather than misfortune (or providential ordering) reflected a new political awareness in CELAM's social teaching.¹⁶

13 The origins of liberation theology as a cohesive social movement in the 1960s and its development in the 1970s have been superbly documented by C. Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

14 CELAM, *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council*, second edition (Washington, D.C.: Bishop's Conference, 1973). The documents that were most significant for the development of liberation theology are reprinted in Hennelly (ed.), *Liberation Theology*, 89–119.

15 *Document on Justice*, § 20.

16 For example, the declaration in the *Document on Justice* (which echoed *Populorum Progressio*, § 30) stated that '... misery, as a collective fact, expresses itself as injustice which cries to the heavens' (§ 1). The denunciation of poverty in the *Document on the Poverty of the Church* was equally emphatic: 'The Latin American bishops cannot remain indifferent in the face of the tremendous social injustices existent in Latin

Second, Medellín called for a clearer witness to the church's teaching in its own institutional life. The *Document on the Poverty of the Church* summarised the challenges that the church needed to address:

In this context a poor church: denounces the unjust lack of this world's goods and the sin that begets it; preaches and lives in spiritual poverty, as an attitude of spiritual childhood and openness to the Lord; is itself bound to material poverty.¹⁷

In § 10 the bishops spoke of their 'duty of solidarity with the poor'. They also emphasised that the commitment to the poor in wider society and the commitment to poverty in the church's institutional life were closely linked. The church committed itself to material poverty so that it could strengthen its solidarity with the poor and live more easily in spiritual poverty.¹⁸

The third feature of Medellín's commitment to the poor was the recognition of poverty as a structural problem in terms of class oppression and the theological judgement that this was a 'sinful situation'. This was clearest in the *Document on Peace*, where the bishops took-up a line from *Populorum Progressio* (§ 87) that suggested that development might be a new word

America, which keep the majority of our peoples in dismal poverty, which in many cases becomes inhuman wretchedness. A deafening cry pours from the throats of millions of men and women asking their pastors for a liberation that reaches them from nowhere else' (§ 1-2).

17 *Document on the Poverty of the Church*, § 5. The bishops set out the consequence of this in § 9: 'The Lord's distinct commandment to "evangelize the poor" ought to bring us to a distribution of resources and apostolic personnel that effectively give preference to the poorest and most needy sectors and to those segregated for any cause whatsoever, animating and accelerating the initiatives and studies that are already being made with that goal in mind. We, the bishops, wish to come closer to the poor in sincerity and fellowship, making ourselves accessible to them.'

18 'This solidarity means that we make ours their problems and their struggles, that we know how to speak with them. This has to be concretized in criticism of injustice and oppression, in the struggle against the intolerable situation that a poor person often has to tolerate, in the willingness to dialogue with the groups responsible for that situation in order to make them understand their obligations' (*Document on the Poverty of the Church*, § 10).

for peace. The bishops pointed to the injustice of underdevelopment as a sinful feature of Latin America:

If development is 'the new name for peace' Latin American underdevelopment, with its own characteristics in the different countries, is an unjust situation which promotes tensions that conspire against peace... When speaking of injustice, we refer to those realities that constitute a sinful situation...¹⁹

The *Document on Peace* addressed both class-tensions in terms of internal colonialism and international tensions in terms of neo-colonialism. It pointed to 'extreme inequalities between social classes' (§ 3) in Latin America, and deplored the way that 'some members of the dominant sectors occasionally resort to the use of force to repress drastically any attempt at opposition' (§ 6). At an international level, it repeated *Populorum Progressio*'s condemnation of the 'international imperialism of money' (§ 9).²⁰ It also noted that the countries that produced raw material remained poor, whilst the manufacturing countries enrich themselves (§ 9), and it criticised the progressive debt that absorbed the greater part of Latin American gains (§ 9).²¹

The months May–August 1968 therefore marked a radical shift for the church in Latin America, and signalled a new direction that many in the church would take in the years that followed.

19 *Document on Peace*, § 1.

20 Catholic social teaching that stretched back to the social encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931).

21 See also the complaint in the *Document on Justice* that 'Many of our workers ... experience a situation of dependence on inhuman economic systems and institutions: a situation which, for many of them borders on slavery' (§ 11).

The Movement

Development of liberation theology in the 1970s

In the 1970s many church leaders and laypeople responded to Medellín's commitment to the poor, and liberation theology took off as a movement in the Latin American church. The 1970s were difficult years in Latin America. Military coups took place in Bolivia, Chile and Uruguay (1973) and later in Argentina (1976). Repression also increased in countries already under military regimes (especially noticeable in Brazil after 1968, El Salvador after 1969 and Peru after 1975). By 1978 only Colombia, Venezuela and Guyana in South America were free from military dictatorship.²² In Central America, the Somoza dictatorship held sway in Nicaragua and the military controlled Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

In the face of widespread repression and harassment, liberation theology and progressive church communities made impressive headway, and seemed to offer signs of a major church renewal. As liberation theology reached maturity as a social movement, there were also a number of new developments in its theology and methodology. The Documents of the third General Meeting of the Council of Latin American Bishops at Puebla, Mexico, in 1979 (known as CELAM III), reflected three particularly important new emphases, which received greater attention as the movement developed during the 1970s: first, the terminology of the 'option for the poor'; second, a new form of popular participation, which incarnated the ideals of liberation theology in the base communities; third, the 'conversion' of the church and the transformation of theology through its contact with the poor, especially in the base communities.

If the language of 'liberation' played a crucial role in initiating the movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the idea of an 'option for the

22 See P. Lernoux, *Cry of the People: The Struggle for Human Rights in Latin America. The Catholic Church in Conflict with U.S. Policy*, revised edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), esp. 10.

poor' was equally important in setting the agenda for the next phase.²³ At the end of the decade, the classic phrase 'preferential option for the poor' expressed at Puebla (§ 1134) clarified that liberation theology's option for the poor was – and always had been – a 'preferential' concern and never an exclusive one.²⁴ What made the option so significant was that liberation theology did not shy away from the political conflicts that solidarity with the poor inevitably involved in situations of structural injustice and military dictatorship. Furthermore, talk of an option for the poor also went alongside a major development in liberation theology during the 1970s, which transformed its relationship to the poor and its methodological approach to theology.

For any assessment of the long-term legacy of liberation theology in Latin America or elsewhere, it is vital to appreciate that the 'option for the poor' had two separate dimensions. Firstly, there was the political option itself, which was initiated in the late 1960s, when liberation theologians committed themselves to the interests and needs of the poor. Second, there were the implications of this commitment for theology as a discipline. Working through the methodological implications of the option in the

23 Critics of liberation theology objected to the idea of an 'option' for the poor and claimed that it made the church and theology partial and exclusive. However, although the precise phraseology might have been new, the basic idea of an 'option' had clear precedents in Catholic social tradition identified above. Special concern for the rights of the poor (as a responsibility for civil authorities) had been part of the social tradition since *Rerum Novarum*. The church's recognition of its own social responsibilities to the poor (beginning in the early 1960s and reinforced by Vatican II) suggested that the principle should be extended from civil authorities to the church itself. Liberation theologians also pointed out that the Bible – and especially the gospels – showed the same preferential interest in the poor; the poor were most in need and the church had a special responsibility to stand alongside them.

24 'We affirm the need for conversion on the part of the whole Church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral liberation'. CELAM, *Puebla: Evangelization at Present and in the Future of Latin America: Conclusions*. Official English Edition of the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops, Puebla, Mexico, 1979 (Slough: St Paul Publications, London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1980) § 1134.

1970s pointed to a new theological approach based on what might be called an 'epistemological option' alongside the political and social option. It was the epistemological option – a new way of knowing God in and through the lives of the poor and their struggle for justice – which unexpectedly transformed liberation theology in the 1970s and led some to speak of the poor 'converting' the church.

There were a number of factors that encouraged this development. The work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire on a 'pedagogy of the oppressed' was one critical factor. Freire had emphasised that liberating education needed to treat people as subjects and not just objects. This required a faith in the people as partners in a dialogue and not just recipients of information.²⁵ Freire's critique of traditional education was easily transferable to traditional approaches to theology. His work set out the challenge to traditional didactic approaches and provided a theoretical framework in which to understand the new alternative. At a more direct and experiential level, however, it was the base communities that proved the most decisive factor.

Medellín gave support to the nascent base community movements and during the 1970s the CEBs (Base Ecclesial Communities) spread rapidly in many Latin American countries.²⁶ Their strength varied from place to place, but they were especially influential in Brazil and Central America.²⁷ The communities played an important role in the dissemination of liberation theology amongst ordinary people, and many base communities members were transformed into social activists through contact with liberation theology. However, a less expected feature of this process was that that priests, women religious, pastoral workers and theologians were themselves transformed by their contact with the poor. Many communities

25 See P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. M. Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1970).

26 See *Document on Justice*, § 20. In English, the CEBs are sometimes referred to as BCCs (Base Christian Communities or Base Church Communities).

27 A classic example is the record of the Solentiname community presented in the work of E. Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, 4 volumes, trans. D.D. Walsh (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1976–82).

showed that they were able to take-over and live out the church's option for them with enthusiasm and dignity. The poor were not just passive objects of an option made by the church; they were active subjects who took the option forward in new ways.

Jon Sobrino described how the new contact and appreciation of the poor contributed to the shift within liberation theology in the 1970s:

The important thing about the decade of the 1970s, then, was our rediscovery of the real life of the impoverished majorities, together with our evangelical rediscovery that it is to them that the good news of the gospel is addressed. In this perspective, the poor become the locus, the place, of the Christian life....²⁸

The lives of the poor became not just an ethical priority for social work but also an historical *locus* where God was revealed in a special way. Sobrino expressed this clearly when he said: 'This means that the poor are the authentic *theological source* for understanding Christian truth and practice.'²⁹ The epistemological commitment to the poor meant that Latin American liberation theologians like Gutiérrez and Sobrino judged their priorities and procedures in terms of their relevance to the poor and took the experiences of the poor as the starting point for their theological work.

Works in liberation theology in the 1970s built on and deepened the breakthroughs of the late-1960s to initiate a new phase in the liberation theology movement. The terminology of an 'option for the poor', the spread of the base communities and the distinctively new epistemological orientation were three of the liberation theology's most important developments of the decade. They did not replace the earlier breakthroughs (which remained essential to the movement) but took them in unexpected directions and extended them to new levels. The result was in continuity with the early

28 J. Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Towards a Political Holiness*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988) 3.

29 J. Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, London: SCM Press, 1984) 93. See also: 'The poor are not simply beneficiaries of liberation. By the mere fact that they exist, for believers they are the historical locus of God, the "place" where God is found in history'. Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, 24.

work but distinctly different from it, and this opened the way for further changes in the 1980s.³⁰

The maturation of liberation theology in the 1980s

In a passage in the 'Conclusions' at CELAM III, the bishops had signalled a broader understanding of poverty than the mainly economic focus that had tended to dominate the very early works of liberation theology. The bishops noted that 'the poor do not lack simply material goods. They also miss, on the level of human dignity, full participation in socio-political life' (§ 1135). In a footnote, they added: 'Those found in this category are principally our indigenous peoples, peasants, manual laborers, marginalized urban dwellers and, in particular the women of these social groups. The women are doubly oppressed and marginalized' (§ 1135). This broader sense of poverty and the poor pointed to a shift that would find even greater prominence in the 1980s and was one of the most significant marks of the maturation of liberation theology during the new decade.

The need to extend the analysis of oppression from a class-based economic and political analysis to a more inclusive social framework was both one of the great strengths and the great weaknesses of the liberation theology in the 1980s.³¹ It was a strength in as much as a more comprehensive analysis was urgently required and it would provide new horizons for theological reflection. Theologians in other contexts (especially

30 Juan Luis Segundo, who was rather uneasy with the way that liberation theology had changed, went as far as to say that it amounted to two different liberation theologies; see J.L. Segundo, 'Two Theologies of Liberation', *The Month* 17 (October 1984); reprinted Hennelly (ed.), *Liberation Theology*, 353–66.

31 George De Schrijver examines the 1980s and 1990s in terms of a shift from economic class analysis to a broader cultural analysis in 'Paradigm Shift in Third-World Theologies of Liberation: From Socio-Economic Analysis to Cultural Analysis?' in George De Schrijver (ed.), *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998). De Schrijver's book offers useful responses (and his own reply) to his thesis.

feminist and black theologians in North America, and other Third World theologians in Africa and Asia) increasingly criticised the limitations of Latin American liberation theology in its dealing with gender, race and indigenous cultures.³² Gutiérrez (who was more sensitive to these wider concerns than many other liberation theologians) sketched the new agenda in his contribution to the meeting of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians in São Paulo in 1980.³³ The final document from the meeting echoed his concerns:

The church of the Third World must commit itself to those struggles for liberation that take up specific concerns of ethnic, racial and sex groups, within the overall framework of the struggle of the poor. Indigenous peoples, blacks, and women of the popular classes will always deserve special attention from our church and a growing concern on the part of our theology.³⁴

In some cases this made it easier for new voices within the movement, which were often more sensitive to the challenges and better able to deal with them, to take on a greater role. This was especially true for women theologians, who had been much more marginalised in the 1970s.³⁵ In the 1980s women theologians in Latin America took the lead in address-

32 Engagement with sexuality was equally absent from the work of Latin Americans in the 1960s and 1970s, but, unlike gender, race and culture, there was scarcely even the attempt to address it in the 1980s or 1990s. Despite its importance for understanding the real lives of the poor, and especially the oppressions that women face in a traditional *machista* culture, liberation theology has been very reluctant to engage with sexuality. For a forceful criticism of liberation theology's weakness with regard to gender and sexuality, see M. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

33 G. Gutiérrez, 'The Irruption of the Poor in Latin America', in S. Torres and J. Eagleson (eds), *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*, EATWOT International Ecumenical Congress of Theology, São Paulo, Brazil, 20 February–2 March 1980 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981) 107–23, at 111.

34 EATWOT Final Document, in Torres and Eagleson (eds), *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*, 231–46, at 245.

35 See the various contributors to E. Tamez (ed.), *Through Her Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989).

ing the sexism and gender issues that their male colleagues either did not acknowledge as a source of oppression or were reluctant to reflect upon theologically. However, Latin American women theologians with academic training were few in number. Unfortunately, despite a general readiness in the 1980s to pay lip service to the importance of women's oppression, few male theologians allowed their theology to be radically changed by it. There were, therefore, limits to the progress that liberation theology as a movement could make towards a fuller understanding of the different dynamics of oppression. The same was true for the engagement with race and culture. The attempts to broaden the awareness of oppression in the 1980s did not generate the creative and empowering response that was required. Many male liberation theologians made only token attempts to widen their perspective. Some dismissed the new agenda as merely secondary issues, which could be addressed after the real priorities (politics and economics) had been resolved. Others made more genuine efforts but provided few new insights.³⁶

At the same time, and under intense pressure from the Vatican, many liberation theologians also became more cautious in their direct comments on economic and political issues in the 1980s.³⁷ Gustavo Gutiérrez and Leonardo Boff were under special scrutiny. They had to spend more time responding to criticisms (often very unfair ones) and less time on their own creative theological work. To speak of the poor and God's love for the poor was acceptable; to discuss political and economic analysis provoked complaints of 'politicising the gospel' and 'Marxist reductionism'.

There were also more indirect moves against liberation theology by appointing more conservative bishops to dioceses that had previously been supportive of the base community movement. Training courses, national meetings and other resources that had supported the base communities

36 See Elsa Tamez's interviews of leading male liberation theologians in *Against Machismo: Rubem Alves, Leonardo Boff, Gustavo Gutiérrez, José Míguez Bonino, Juan Luis Segundo and Others Talk about the Struggle of Women* (Oak Park, IL: Meyer-Stone Books, 1987).

37 See P. Larnoux, *People of God: The Struggle for World Catholicism* (New York: Viking, 1989).

were withdrawn.³⁸ In addition, the Vatican moved to absorb some of the key language of liberation theology more explicitly into its own vocabulary and muted the distinctiveness of the Latin American approach. Thus in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) John Paul II endorsed the 'option or love of preference for the poor' (§ 42). Essentially, the Vatican's policy combined firm discipline for 'errant' liberation theologians alongside a take-over and implicit correction of the original liberation theology enterprise.

At the same time, the creative dialogue with liberation theology's grass-roots base came under more strain. The religious situation was far more pluralist than ever before, and liberation theology could no longer expect to be the only active and energetic church presence amongst the poor. Protestant churches – most usually fundamentalist or Pentecostal – spread dramatically during the decade, especially in Central America and Brazil, where the base communities had previously been strongest.³⁹ Some critics claimed that although liberation theology opted for the poor, the poor opted for Pentecostalism.

On a more positive front, the 1980s witnessed a new attention to spirituality and contemplation in the work of some liberation theologians. Gutiérrez had already indicated in *A Theology of Liberation* that there was a 'great need for a spirituality of liberation.'⁴⁰ In the 1980s he developed this in

38 The process of political democratisation in many countries opened up alternative forums for political discussion and social action, and some members of the communities left as a result.

39 On the challenges raised by the Pentecostal churches, see especially D. Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990); D. Stoll and V. Garrard-Burnett, *Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America* (Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1993); P. Berryman, *Religion in the Megacity: Catholic and Protestant Portraits from Latin America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996) 9–101; M. A Vásquez, *The Brazilian Popular Church and the Crisis of Modernity*. Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1998) 74–98; J. Burdick, *Looking for God in Brazil: The Progressive Catholic Church in Urban Brazil's Religious Arena* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993) 182–220.

40 Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 136.

a number of his writings.⁴¹ The rise of *Sendero Luminoso* or ‘Shining Path’ – an armed revolutionary movement based loosely on Maoist strategies and committed to the violent overthrow of society – and the response of government security forces unleashed new terror in Peru. Gutiérrez’s heart-felt meditations on the ‘God of Life’ in a culture of death are very different in tone from his work of the early 1970s, but they conveyed in an equally impressive way his solidarity with the poor and his outrage at the injustices that they suffered. Particularly noteworthy in this regard was Gutiérrez’s reformulation of his methodological principle to encompass contemplation, as well as action as the first step on which critical reflection builds as the second step.⁴²

Likewise, the ‘suffering in hope’ of the Salvadoran people influenced Jon Sobrino’s focus on spirituality as the country degenerated into civil war during the 1980s.⁴³ His work during the period continued to focus on Christology, with increasing attention to experiences of a ‘crucified people’ in the present. In close collaboration with his fellow Jesuit Ignacio Ellacuría – and inspired by the legacy of Archbishop Oscar Romero – Sobrino read the idea of the Suffering Servant and Crucified Christ into the suffering and deaths of the Salvadoran people in ways that brought both ancient history and current reality to life.⁴⁴

41 See especially G. Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, trans. M.J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, London: SCM Press, 1991); G. Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, trans. M.J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, London: SCM Press, 1984); G. Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. M.J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, London: SCM Press, 1987).

42 See especially Gutiérrez, *On Job*, xi–xiv.

43 J. Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Towards a Political Holiness*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988).

44 J. Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America*, trans. various (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987). After Ellacuría’s assassination along with five other Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter by the Salvadoran military on 16 November 1989, Sobrino continued to develop this theme into the 1990s. See especially J. Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, trans. P. Burns and F. McDonagh (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Burns and Oates; 1994); J. Sobrino, *The Principle of*

The works by Gutiérrez, Sobrino and others in the 1980s are some of the most thought-provoking writings by liberation theologians. They deepen the spiritual commitment to the liberation process and generate provocative insights into God's concern for the poor. However, they were not enough to overcome the growing problems that the movement faced as the 1980s progressed. Whilst the new insights were very valuable, they could not rectify the difficulties that the movement faced in its terminology of liberation. There was increasing recognition that straightforward talk of liberation was misleading, and earlier assumptions about economic dependency over-simplistic, but there was little that was offered as an alternative.

In retrospect, the 1980s was the decade in which liberation theology reached methodological maturity and many of the most profound works of liberation theology were written. Nonetheless, by the end of the decade liberation theology was facing serious problems. These included: its terminology of liberation and its political and economic analysis growing steadily less relevant to a new context; the difficulties of engaging with wider dimensions of oppression in a creative and energising way; local pressures from conservative bishops and centralised opposition in the Vatican; a decline in the base communities as some members moved to more secular politics and others joined Pentecostal churches. Liberation theology was still a powerful theological influence in Latin America and influential in progressive theological circles around the world; however, as a social movement its ability to provide leadership to respond to the neo-liberal market forces that were transforming Latin America and the entire the global economy had been severely weakened.

The strengths and weaknesses of Latin American liberation theology in the 1980s were illustrated in an ambitious project to systematise liberation theology's contribution to theology. The *Theology and Liberation Series* was planned in the mid-1980s as a comprehensive statement on doctrinal areas in a fifty-volume work that involved a number of the best-known liberation

theologians. However, the project never realised its ambitious hopes and it was eventually suspended in 1993. The difficulties with the *Theology and Liberation Series* were a clear indication that despite the maturity of its theological writing, the liberation theology movement at the turn of the decade was entering a critical new phase.

The crisis of liberation theology in the 1990s

The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 showed the power of the market at work across the world. It would be far too simplistic to see the fall of the wall as proof of the ‘triumph’ of capitalism or the ‘failure’ of liberation theology, because the primary influence on liberation theology had always been the experiences of the poor, and not Marxist theory or hopes for a socialist state; nonetheless, the fall of the wall was an important symbol of how much economic and political assumptions had changed from liberation theology’s origins in the 1960s.⁴⁵

- 45 On the crisis within liberation theology, see, for example, F. Betto, ‘Did Liberation Theology Collapse with the Berlin Wall?’ *Religion, State and Society* 21/1 (1993) 33–38; R. Nagle, *Claiming the Virgin: The Broken Promise of Liberation Theology in Brazil* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996); I. Linden, *Liberation Theology: Coming of Age?* (London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1997); J.M. Vigil, ‘Is there a Change of Paradigm in Liberation Theology?’ *SEDOS* 29/12 (1997) 315–21; M. Löwy, *The War of the Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1996); J. Comblin, *Called for Freedom: The Changing Context of Liberation Theology*, trans. P. Berryman (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998); J.L. Kater, ‘Whatever Happened to Liberation Theology? New Directions for Theological Reflection in Latin America,’ *Anglican Theological Review* 83/4 (Autumn 2001) 735–73; I. Petrella (ed.), *Latin American Liberation Theology: The Next Generation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2005); I. Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto* (London: SCM Press, 2006); M. Althaus-Reid, I. Petrella and L.C. Susin (eds), *Another Possible World* (London: SCM Press, 2007); I. Petrella, *Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic* (London: SCM Press, 2008).

The globalisation of the free-market confirmed the neo-liberal trend apparent in Latin America in the 1980s, and exposed the major questions that this raised for the economic analysis and terminology commonly associated with liberation theology.⁴⁶ Despite the many flaws of the socialist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, at least they had shown that there was an alternative to free-market capitalism.⁴⁷ The possibility of an alternative informed the formulation of 'liberation versus dependency' in liberation theology's early works. In the 1990s they had to rethink many of these assumptions and hopes and were left with more questions than answers. There were few grounds for optimism that capitalism would bring relief to the poor but no clear alternatives. The financial shocks that hit Mexico and Brazil in the 1990s and Argentina in 2002 suggested that neo-liberalism could not bring economic salvation or promote social equality. However, although the economic problems were obvious, the solutions remained elusive. The suffering of the poor was largely the same, but the faith and hopes of the 1960s and 1970s had been replaced with uncertainty and doubt.

To make matters worse, the Vatican's continued opposition to the movement compounded the problems that liberation theology faced. John Paul II's consolidation of control over national bishop conferences (mainly through conservative episcopal appointments) and disciplinary action against individual theologians maintained the pressure on liberation theologians. Pressure on Leonardo Boff led him to resign from the Franciscan order in 1992. In 1995 Ivone Gebara (a Brazilian nun who had been at the forefront of women's contributions to liberation theology) was

46 Whilst a social analysis influenced by Marxism and the discussion of the importance of socialism featured strongly in some of liberation theology's earliest works, since the mid-1970s they have given very little time to these issues, and have not formulated an alternative economic analysis.

47 Liberation theologians recognised areas where even an imperfect socialism had strengths as well as weaknesses when compared to unchecked capitalism, but there was never any significant enthusiasm for the versions of socialism institutionalised in the Soviet Union or in Eastern Europe. See especially the discussion in McGovern, *Liberation Theology and its Critics*, 156–94.

criticised for remarks about abortion she had made to the magazine *Veja* in 1993, which the magazine misleadingly published under the title 'Nun Says Abortion Not a Sin'.⁴⁸ In 1995 her religious order – the Canonesses of St Augustine – were pressured into sending her to study in Europe for two years.

At the same time, the Vatican continued to make the language of liberation its own, whilst emphasising the distinction between the 'reductionist' political version and the 'authentic' gospel version of liberation. The overall effect of this was that the overt conflict with liberation theologians receded. In a way, liberation theologians could legitimately claim official support and Vatican sanction for their work. However, it became much harder for liberation theologians to preserve the political edge in their message and distinguish themselves from the de-politicised way that others used their language.

At a theological level, some liberation theologians continued to engage with more diverse perspectives in their writing. Indigenous and ecological issues were added alongside the 1980s interest in race, culture and gender, to further extend and expand the original class analysis.⁴⁹ As in the 1980s, in principle this wider perspective was an appropriate and necessary development for their message to preserve its integrity. However, in practice the diffusion and greater complexity of the issues made communication of a central message even more difficult and may have contributed to the feeling that the movement had in some sense lost its way. Grappling with new issues tended to fragment their previously clear focus on poverty. Any one of these factors would have been a significant challenge for liberation

48 See *The Tablet* 249 (1 July 1995) 851; I. Gebara, 'The Abortion Debate in Brazil: A Report from an Eco-Feminist Philosopher and Theologian Under Siege', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 11/2 (1995) 129–36.

49 On ecology and the environment, see L. Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, trans. J. Cumming (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995); L. Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997). On inculturation and indigenisation, see M.M. Marzal *et al.*, *The Indian Face of God in Latin America*, trans. P.R. Hall (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996).

theology; coming together in the way that they did, they created a major crisis.

The Legacy of Latin American Liberation Theology

As described above, the emergence of liberation theology in 1968 marked three important breakthroughs: first, a pastoral concern for the poor that involved political commitment and solidarity with their struggles; second, a terminology of 'liberation' that provided a clear focus for the movement; and third, a methodology that linked theology to social analysis and rooted theological reflection in social action.

The 1970s and 1980s added at least three further key theological insights, which were to shape liberation theology as a movement: first, the language of an 'option for the poor'; second, the active involvement of the poor in the process of liberative action and reflection in the base communities; and third, an epistemology that recognised the struggles of the poor as a special *locus* of God's revelation.

As the impact of the first generation of liberation theologians fades, there are few signs of a new generation revitalising and sustaining liberation theology as an organised and influential movement in theology, in the church and in wider society. Many critics of the movement have been eager to call it a failure and pronounce it dead. However, even if liberation theology has little future as an organised movement, the importance and value of its theological legacy should be acknowledged. Those involved with liberation theology never claimed that the movement was an end in itself; it was always a means to an end, a way of witnessing to a God of life and liberation in a world of death and oppression. As Gutiérrez says, 'I was a Christian long before liberation theology and I will be a Christian long after liberation theology'.⁵⁰

The terminology of ‘liberation’ (which was once a key strength of liberation theology) now makes liberation theology vulnerable to dismissive superficial judgements. If the strong emphasis on liberation is no longer the helpful language that it once was – and others have co-opted it anyway – the ‘theology of liberation’ may be at an end. However, in assessing liberation theology it should be remembered that although it always had important limitations – and these certainly became more apparent in the 1990s – the same is true for any theological attempt to engage with social issues on the historical plane. Liberation theology’s terminology of liberation may now seem dated in the neo-liberal world economy, its social analysis has often been too limited, and postmodernism raises questions about its underlying philosophical foundations. However, the same criticisms could be made of many other theologies. Liberation theology’s difficulties in reading the signs of the current times and presenting a prophetic response do not belong to liberation theology alone. If anything, the global financial crisis that erupted in 2008 suggests that, even forty years after Medellín, liberation theology might still have much to say on the world’s problems, even if economic solutions are elusive.

Furthermore, in terms of the six key insights identified above, it is only the terminology of liberation that has lost any currency. The other aspects of liberation theology, all of which relate to its methodological approach to theology, have stood the test of time remarkably well, and should be claimed as a precious and long-term legacy for the future of theology.

Conclusion

Liberation theology first arose in response to the cries of the poor. Inequality in Latin America and across the world shows clear signs of getting worse rather than better in the future. As the twenty-first century began, there were more poor people in Latin America than when liberation theology began in the 1960s, and those who were poor were poorer than ever before.

The movement called liberation theology may have now virtually come to an end, but the issues that it dealt with will remain just as pressing and many of its commitments just as important. Even if the terminology has to change, Christian theology in Latin America and elsewhere will need to keep faith with and build upon the political, methodological and epistemological principles of liberation theology if it is to adequately engage with these issues in the future.