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THE ROOTS OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY IN EL SALVADOR

Latin American liberation theology is a culturally relevant theory of salvation. Radically spiritual and enigmatically political, the movement emerged as a religious response to the profound poverty of the indigenous peoples of Latin America. The historical basis for the promotion of social justice in the American continents can be traced to the violent, cultural clash between the European Christians and the cosmogonist native Americans of the 15th century. South American Spanish political hegemony and paternalistic, religious domination ensued—paving the way for open rebellion, passive-aggressive resistance, and an awakened consciousness of the mission of the Catholic Church. From the various missionary orders that ministered to the Indians after the “conquest” to the 20th century Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador, the challenge involved dealing with the cultures of the Indians and their mixed race descendents. Poverty was their salient feature, and the Church needed to transcend its theoretical dogmas in order for the poor to participate in the good news of salvation. The writings of the Jesuits in El Salvador and the eyewitness accounts of the Salvadoran people give voice to the sufferings of those repressed by the Salvadoran government and military from 1970 to 1990. Rather than define liberation theology, socio-political history actualizes it as a work in progress.

History and the Economy

The precursor of the movement, Padre Bartolomé de las Casas, transformed himself from that of an obedient Spanish priest serving the monarchy to a militant activist Mexican bishop

denouncing the throne's exploitation of the Indians. Since his arrival in La Española in 1502, Las Casas documented his experiences with the native peoples and narrated their violent conquest and colonization until 1520. In his book La Historia de las Indias, Las Casas idealized the Indian as "natural, simple, benigna, y humilde" (natural, simple, benign, and humble). Using political influence, he arranged interviews with the King and Queen of Spain to persuade them that the Indians were rational beings capable of evangelization through peaceful means. Las Casas claimed that the Indian "problem" could not be solved by transculturation: "el condicionamiento social, político, económico, y psicológico para modelar al indio a la imagen y la semejanza del europeo" (the social, political, economical, and psychological conditioning of the Indian to form him in the image and likeness of the European).ⁱ To deprive the Indians of their communal property, their worship systems, and their language created an obligation for true Christians to work for a just society in converting them. Spain justified enslavement as the price for civilization and the catalyst for economic development of the Indies. Although the King of Spain promulgated laws prohibiting slavery in 1542, the laws were not enforced in the new world. The Papacy declared that Indians had souls in 1544, yet the Indians themselves held no value to the Spaniards at the end of the 16th century. Their numbers had been reduced from around ninety million to less than ten.ⁱⁱ The memory of the conquest remains in the collective consciousness of the people and haunts the consciences of contemporary theologians. In a Special Concilium marking the discovery of the Americas Pablo Richard declared: "We have to answer for this genocide, in radical solidarity with the victims, as theologians and as a Church."ⁱⁱⁱ

The history of El Salvador mirrors the oppression of the peoples of color in the rest of Latin America. Enduring three centuries of colonial domination (1524 to 1770), the Indians of Central America lost their right to the use of their land and its rich, volcanic soil. This betrayal deeply violated the cultural identity of a people whose Maya and Aztec ancestors revered the earth and its plant life as accessible to all for the common good. Land became a religious symbol because of its mystery. In contrast, the Spaniards viewed it as a prize to be consumed and distributed for personal gain. During the 16th century the Indians lived on "ejidos," legal,

communal land parcels which they administered. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the Spanish aristocrats seized these most fertile lands in the Central Highlands and forced the Indians to move to the outlying areas. Dispossessed and distraught, the Indians abandoned their towns in a disorderly migration and posed no threat to the usurpers. In accordance with their belief that possession meant permanent right to ownership, the Spaniards set up “haciendas” or large tracts of land developed for a type of commercial agriculture. Ten to fifteen Spanish families occupied each hacienda and controlled the land and its resident workers. The expansion of the haciendas was easy, since the areas of land relegated to the Indians incurred strict regulations and heavy tributes. By the end of the colonial period (1770), four hundred Spanish families comprised the oligarchy in possession of the former Indian towns. A new social class of landless “ladinos” arose. Precursors of the “mestizos,” (part Indian and part European), the pure-blooded Indian “ladinos” spoke Spanish and dressed like Spaniards. They worked and lived on the plantations, also mistreating and exploiting the Indians who maintained their native tongues and dress.

Coffee production on the large estates profoundly transformed the mountainous regions of Central America, and the ruling families excluded the Indians, ladinos, and mestizos from social and economic power. After the demise of the authority of Spain in 1821, five Central American countries were created: El Salvador (the smallest and most populated), Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Guatemala. In El Salvador in 1882 the oligarchy and the military solidified their control by abolishing all collective village landholding. Nothing could interfere with the lucrative coffee business. Spanish monopolistic practices impeded the rise of a middle class, and the disenfranchised peoples of mixed races and colors constituted the masses of the poor. The poor had to be content with daily suffering as a passage to eternal life.

Jesuit Theology and Political Reality

A humanist/religious approach to social reform dates back to the presence of the Jesuits in the Americas in the 17th and 18th centuries. In addition to serving the poor, their international missionaries (not exclusively Spanish) studied the history, geography, and natural environment of the continent. Jesuit literature extolled the beauties of nature. Rafael Landívar (1731-1793)

published a poem in modern Latin “*Rusticatio mexicana*” idealizing rural customs, manners, and language. He imbued the common life with meaning through his clarity of style, respect for form, and elegant lyrics.^{iv} In 1782 the Jesuit historian Francisco Xavier Clavijero (1731-1787) wrote La Historia antigua de México, a social commentary on the richness of the language, art, and culture of the Aztecs. He described the organization of their social life and the complexity of the Nahuatl language in order to illustrate their capacity for rationality—an indication of their potential to adapt to Christian spirituality.^v

Influenced by 18th century European Enlightenment, the Jesuits claimed reason as the source of authority and community consent as the source of public power. The Jesuit historian Francisco Xavier Alegre wrote that representative governments and Christianity could co-exist—that the human and the divine combine to form a just society.^{vi} Respecting the values of labor, the economy, and political freedom, the Jesuits used their wealth as plantation owners to operate seminaries, convents, town political centers, and banking facilities. Modernistic and progressive, they advocated independence of the colonies from royal absolutist Spain. Their open belligerence to authority threatened traditional, scholastic Catholicism to its core. Fearing their political power, the monarchy expelled the Jesuits from the continent in 1767. Chastised yet rebellious, the Jesuits produced eloquent writings in exile detailing the hatred of the Indians for the Spanish magistrates, the arbitrary military conscription of the peasants, the excessive taxes, and the overt racism. What they did, in effect, was call into question the predominant theological framework of an inherent duality between the natural and the supernatural. Could immortality be achieved while ignoring the common good? In laying moral claim to the public sphere, the Jesuits of the 18th century foreshadowed the emergence of liberation theology in the 20th.

In the 19th century, collectivist and capitalist societies failed to address social justice as a moral issue. They inherited the mechanistic, rational, empirical, and value free judgments of the natural sciences and the social sciences from the previous three centuries. Reason and science replaced faith and dogma as social values. Church dogma posited eternal truths as being outside the realm of history and necessarily apolitical. Morality was an individual submission to the will

of God, restricted to the private realm. The poor could look to the afterlife for liberation. The Church needed to guide them to attain salvation through acceptance and obedience to the divine plan of salvation. This theological perspective did not change in the 20th century until Vatican Council II.

Politics and religion in El Salvador, however, became inextricably intertwined. . The recurrent crises of the hegemony of the dominant classes remained intact. By the 1930's the oligarchy consisted of fourteen families who controlled the "fincas" or coffee estates with support of the military and the clergy. Many factors constrained the development of a middle class: lack of political will to develop an organized party, the unchecked powers of the military, rigged elections, and lack of support for Christian Democrats for fear of communism. In 1931 the army seized control of the country, escalating ethnic tensions and civil strife. Illiterate, unemployed, and chronically poor, the peasants revolted along with the workers' unions and the Salvadoran Communist political party members. Skilled in terrorism, the Armed Forces killed 30,000 civilians to squash the insurrection. Especially targeted for extinction were those visibly Indian zones (on the pretext of a communist threat.) From 1932 to 1944 General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez expanded the powers of government and the military. In 1944 an officer corps seized control of the country. Ignoring the needs of the poor, successive military regimes fortified the aristocracy and engendered an organized network of broad-based support for a revolution of the masses. The Catholic Church in Latin America was closely identified with the rich and powerful. Educated clergy arose from the privileged classes; their background and training did not prepare them to redress the social inequalities of the indigenous communities they served. "Guardium et Spes," the pastoral constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Second Vatican Council) signaled a profound change in outlook. In Chapter One, Article 7 of "The Dignity of the Human Person," Pope Paul VI stated: "The social order requires constant improvement. It must be founded on truth, built on justice, and animated by love; in freedom it should grow every day toward a more humane balance."^{vii} Vatican II paved the way for the Latin Church to acknowledge the need to minister to temporal as well as spiritual needs. The

Second Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellín, Colombia in 1968 gave birth to liberation theology: spread the Gospel in every day life and help the poor to improve their lot in life. The bishops advocated protecting and respecting the indigenous cultures and supporting their rights to communal territory. Heavily Marxist and socialist in influence, they proposed models for the organization of communal labor and argued in favor of a participatory role for the working class. Ecumenical tolerance would also serve to evangelize the poor. Gustavo Gutiérrez, Peruvian theologian and chief spokesman for the liberation theology movement, characterized political activity as spiritual. God reveals Himself through the struggles of the poor. The Salvadoran people endured 50 years of military dictatorship from 1931 to 1981. By 1977, popular support had grown for guerrilla warfare against the repressive regimes. Catholic theologians began to view poverty as the locus of God's salvation—a gift from the poor inviting conversion. Colombian priest Camilo Torres Restrepo became a guerrilla. Brazilian Franciscan theologian Leonardo Boff declared the Church to be in a time of trial—waiting for personal interpretation of scripture based on human experience. Father Jon Sobrino, a Basque priest who assumed Salvadoran citizenship, defined salvation as an effort to achieve a just social order on earth. According to Sobrino, the religious vow of obedience involved “all renunciation of totalitarianism as well as individual freedom; rejection of consumerism and all class distinctions and profit.”^{viii}

Victimization of the Poor

Why was the Church in El Salvador driven to such extremes? Approximately 80% of the population suffered from illiteracy, joblessness, displacement, hunger, political repression, and racial discrimination. In addition, the twenty-year civil war (1970 to 1990) resulted in the deaths of 70,000 to 75,000 Salvadorans.^{ix} In a 1970 discourse on the mission of the “Universidad de Centro América José Simeón Cañas” (the UCA of San Salvador) the rector Ignacio Ellacuría defined liberation as: “aquel proceso que haga desaparecer todo lo que haya de oprimiente en lo biológico, en lo social y en lo económico, en lo político y en lo cultural.” (That process by which disappears all that is oppressive in biological, social, economic, political, and cultural life.)^x

Father Ellacuría was to become a martyr for the cause. San Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Romero denounced the terrorist government's military death squads in radio broadcasts, sermons, public addresses, international appeals, and pastoral letters. In 1980 he was shot during the consecration of the Mass along with other defenseless members of the congregation. The public outcry of the clergy intensified, as did guerrilla warfare. In 1989 the elite military battalion Atlacatl massacred six Jesuit priests and two housekeepers of the UCA: Segundo Montes, Nacho Martín Baró, Ignacio Ellacuría, Joaquín López y López, Julia Elba, and Celina Elba. Their crime was telling the truth about the extreme poverty and cruel treatment of the landless masses of El Salvador. The official Catholic Church was reticent to provide support for armed revolt. Fearing communism, the United States supported the Salvadoran government by providing training to the Armed Forces and contributing billions of dollars in military and economic aid between 1980 and 1992.

The common people of El Salvador received the most punishment. Eyewitness accounts and personal testimonies of the surviving relatives of the victims expose the brutality and indifference of the military torturers. In La Matanza de los pobres, María López and Jon Sobrino recount an incident of January 1981 wherein a young female was assassinated in her home in front of her family-- because the family members did not open the door fast enough for the guards to interrogate them.^{xi} Other victims were hung out in the sun to die, had their noses or fingers removed, were electrocuted, or beheaded. The armed forces removed children from their homes and sent them to military camps. According to liberation theology, people experiencing torture and death were imitating Christ and participating in salvation history. Unfortunately, the outside world chose not to know or act upon the magnitude of the crimes.

Liberation theology grew out of a sense of desperation with poverty, fear, and injustice. It takes its sustenance from the solidarity of the Latin American Church with the plight of the poor. The poor evolved from those with native "Indian" blood in the 15th century to all the underrepresented classless peasants of mixed races living in the 20th century and beyond. After three years of United Nations supervision of the 1992 Peace Accords, the Jesuit rector of the

UCA Miguel F. Estrada commented in 1995 that the armed forces were re-surfacing in power.

The Catholic Church's mission of a preferential option for the poor may be their only beacon of hope in the struggle for survival.

ENDNOTES

ⁱJosé Ortega, "Las Casas: Precursor de la Teología de Liberación." *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 466:67-88 April 1989 p 72.

ⁱⁱPablo Richard, "1492: The Violence of God and the Future of Christianity" in *1492-1992: The Voice of the Victims*, edited by Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, London: SCM Press, 1990.

ⁱⁱⁱRichard, p 61.

^{iv}Rafaél Landívar, *Rusticatio mexicana: copia facsimilar de la edición de Bolonia, 1782*. Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1950.

^vFrancesco Xavier Clavijero, *Historia antigua de México. M: Porrúa, 1964*.

^{vi}Francisco Xavier Alegre, *La Historia de la Sociedad de Jesús in la Nueva Española*, Edited by E. Bustamonte, México, 1841. The information was located in the online Catholic Encyclopedia: www.newadvent.org/cathen. An additional source consulted was: Gemelli Careri and Giovanni Francesco, *Viaje a la nueva España*. M: UNAM, 1976.

^{vii}Pope Paul VI, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, Chapter 1, Article 7. Second Vatican Council, 1965. Vatican documents translated into English are available at www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils.

^{viii}Mary Christine Morkosvsky, *South and Meso-American Native Spirituality: From the Cult of the Feather Serpent to the Theology of Liberation*. Crossroad Publishing Co., 1997. p540.

^{ix}Jon Sobrino, *Companions of Jesus: Murder and Martyrdom of Salvadoran Jesuits*. Maryknoll, 1990. p 25.

^xIgnacio Ellacuría, *Escritos universitarios*. UCA: 1999. p 24.

^{xi}María López Vigil/Jon Sobrino. *La Matanza de los Pobres*. UCA: 1988.

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