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Marxism and Liberation Theology

Michael Löwy



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Marxism and Liberation Theology

Michael Löwy

Is religion still, as Marx and Engels saw it in the nineteenth century, a bulwark of reaction, obscurantism and conservatism? To a large extent, the answer is yes. Their view still applies to various leading circles in the Vatican, to the fundamentalist currents of the main faiths (Christian, Jewish or Moslem), to many evangelist groups (and their expression in the so-called "Electronic Church"), and to the majority of the new religious sects - some of which, as the notorious Moon Church, are nothing but a skilful combination of financial manipulations, obscurantist brain-washing and fanatical anti-communism.

However, the emergence of revolutionary Christianity and liberation theology in Latin America (and elsewhere) opens a new historical chapter and raises exciting new questions which cannot be answered without a renewal of the Marxist analysis of religion.

Initially, when confronted with such phenomena, Marxists applied a traditional model of interpretation which counterposed Christian workers and peasants, whom they considered to be supporters of the revolution, to the Church (the clergy), a thoroughly reactionary body. As late as 1966, they could still view the death of one member of that Church, Father Camilo Torres, who had joined the Colombian guerrilla and been killed in a confrontation with the Army that year, as an exceptional case. But the growing commitment of Christians - including many religious and priests - to popular struggles and their massive involvement in the Sandinista revolution clearly showed the need for a new approach.

Another traditional standpoint is to counterpose the radical rank-and-file of the Church to its conservative hierarchy; this may be partially true, but is no longer adequate when a large number of bishops have declared their solidarity with liberation movements of the poor, and, moreover, when this commitment has sometimes cost them their lives, as was the case with Monsignor Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, assassi-

nated by a death squad in March 1980.

Marxists who are disconcerted or confused by these developments still resort to the usual distinction between the valid social practice of these Christians, and their religious ideology, defined as necessarily regressive and idealist. However, with liberation theology we see the appearance of religious thinking using Marxist concepts and inspiring struggles for social liberation...

It is time Marxists realize something new is happening. It is of world historical importance. A significant sector of the Church - both believers and clergy - in Latin America is in the process of changing its position in the field of the class struggle, and going over with its material and spiritual resources to the side of the working people and their fight for a new society.

This new phenomenon has little connection with the former "dialogue" between Christians and Marxists - conceived as two separate camps - and even less with the dull diplomatic negotiations between the bureaucratic apparatuses of the Church and Party. The caricatural example of the latter was the recent Budapest "meeting between Christians and Marxists" - that is, between representatives of the Vatican and East European states. What is happening around liberation theology in Latin America (and in the Philippines and elsewhere is something quite different: a new fraternity between revolutionaries, believers and non-believers, within an emancipatory dynamic outside the control of either Rome or Moscow.

Undoubtedly all this signifies a theoretical and practical challenge to Marxists. It shows the shortcomings of the "classic" Marxist conception of religion - especially in its vulgarized version, reduced to the materialism and anti-clericalism of the eighteenth century bourgeois philosophers. Nevertheless, we can find in Marx's and Engels's writings - and in those of some modern Marxists - concepts and analyses that can help us understand today's rather surprising reality.

* This notebook began as a lecture delivered by Michael Löwy at the International Institute for Research and Education in 1985. Chapter VII is based on an article published in *International Marxist Review*, vol. 2, number 3, summer 1987.

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Latin America



N°10

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I. Marxism and religion: the opium of the people?

The well-known phrase "religion is the opium of the people" is considered as the quintessence of the Marxist conception of the religious phenomenon by most of its supporters and opponents. First of all we should remember that this statement is not specifically Marxist. The same phrase can be found, in various contexts, in the writings of Kant, Herder, Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer and Heinrich Heine...

Marx...

Moreover, an attentive reading of the whole Marxian paragraph where this phrase appears, shows that its author is more nuanced than usually believed. He takes into account the **dual** character of religion:

"Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of an unspiritual situation. It is the opium of the people." (1)

If one reads the whole essay – *Toward the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, written in 1844 – it clearly appears that Marx's viewpoint owes more to left neo-Hegelianism, which saw religion as the alienation of the human essence, than to eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophy, which simply denounced it as a clerical conspiracy. In fact when Marx wrote the above passage he was still a disciple of Feuerbach, a neo-Hegelian. His analysis of religion was therefore "pre-Marxist," without any class reference. But it was nevertheless **dialectical** since it grasped the **contradictory** character of the religious phenomenon: sometimes a legitimization of existing society and sometimes a protest against it. It was only later – particularly with *The German Ideology* (1846) – that the strictly Marxist study of religion as a **social and historical reality** began. This involved an analysis of religion as one of the many forms of ideology, the **spiritual production** of a people, the production of ideas, representations and consciousness – all of which are necessarily conditioned by material production and the corresponding social relations. (2) However, from that moment on, Marx paid very little attention to religion as such, that is as a specific cultural/ideological universe of meaning.

1) Karl Marx, "Toward the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" (1844) in Louis S. Feuer (ed.), *Marx and Engels, Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, London: Collins/Fontana, 1969, p. 304.

2) Karl Marx, *German Ideology* (1846), London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974.

... and Engels

Friedrich Engels displayed a much greater interest than Marx in religious phenomena and their historic role. Engels's main contribution to the Marxist study of religions is his analysis of the relationship of religious representations to class struggle. Over and beyond the philosophical polemic (materialism against idealism) he tried to understand and explain concrete social expressions of religions. Christianity no longer appeared (as in Feuerbach) as a timeless "essence," but as a cultural form undergoing transformations in different historical periods: first as a religion of the slaves, then as the state ideology of the Roman Empire, then tailored to feudal hierarchy and finally adapted to bourgeois society. It thus appears as a symbolic space disputed by antagonistic social forces: feudal theology, bourgeois Protestantism and plebeian heresies. Occasionally his analysis slipped towards a narrowly utilitarian, instrumental interpretation of religious movements:

"... each of the different classes uses its own appropriate religion... and it makes little difference whether these gentlemen believe in their respective religions or not." (3)

Engels seems to find nothing but the "religious disguise" of class interests in the different forms of belief. However, thanks to his class struggle method, Engels realized – unlike the Enlightenment philosophers – that the conflict between materialism and religion is not always identical with the struggle between revolution and reaction. For example, in England in the eighteenth century, materialism in the figure of Hobbes defended absolute monarchy while Protestant sects used religion as their banner in the revolutionary struggle against the Stuarts. (4) In the same way, far from seeing the Church as a socially homogeneous whole, he sketched a remarkable analysis showing how in certain historical conjunctures it divided according to its class composition. Thus during the Reformation, there was on the one side the high clergy, the feudal summit of the hierarchy, and on the other, the lower clergy, which supplied the ideologues of the Reformation and of the revolutionary peasant movement. (5)

While being a materialist, an atheist and an irreconcilable enemy of religion, Engels nevertheless grasped, like the young Marx, the dual character of the

3) F. Engels, "Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of Classical German Philosophy," in Feuer, *op.cit.*, p. 281.

4) F. Engels, "On Materialism," in Feuer, *op.cit.*, p. 99.

5) F. Engels, "The Peasant War in Germany" (1850), in Feuer, *op.cit.*, pp. 422-475.

N°10

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phenomenon: its role in legitimating established order, but also, according to social circumstances, its critical, protest and even revolutionary role. Furthermore, most of the concrete studies he wrote concentrated on this second aspect: focusing, above all, on **primitive Christianity**, the religion of the poor, the banished, the damned, the persecuted and oppressed. The first Christians came from the lowest levels of society: slaves, free men who had been deprived of their rights and small peasants who were crippled by debts. (6)

Engels even went so far as to draw an astonishing parallel between this primitive Christianity and modern socialism:

a) the two great movements are not the creation of leaders and prophets – although prophets are never in short supply in either of them – but are mass movements; b) both are movements of the oppressed, suffering persecution, their members are proscribed and hunted down by the ruling authorities; c) both preach an imminent liberation from slavery and misery. To embellish his comparison Engels, somewhat provocatively, quoted a saying of the French historian Renan:

“If you want to get an idea of what the first Christian communities were like, take a look at a local branch of the International Workingmen's Association.”

The essential difference between the two movements was, according to Engels, that the primitive Christians transposed deliverance to the hereafter whereas socialism places it in this world. (7)

But is this difference as clear-cut as it appears at first sight? In his study of the second great Christian movement – *The Peasant Wars in Germany* – it seems to become blurred: Thomas Münzer, the theologian and leader of the revolutionary peasants and heretic plebeians of the sixteenth century, wanted the immediate establishment **on earth** of the Kingdom of God, the millenarian Kingdom of the prophets. According to Engels, the Kingdom of God for Münzer was a society without class differences, private property and a state authority independent of, and foreign to, the members of that society. However, Engels was still tempted to reduce religion to a stratagem: he spoke of Münzer's Christian “phraseology” and his biblical “cloak.” The specifically religious dimension of Münzerian millenarianism, its spiritual and moral force, its authentically experienced mystical depth, seem to have eluded him. (8)*

Having said this, with his analysis of the religious phenomena from the viewpoint of class struggle, Engels brought out the protest potential of religion and opened the way for a new approach – distinct both from eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophy and from

6) F. Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969, pp. 121-22, 407.

7) F. Engels, “Contribution to a History of Primitive Christianity,” in Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, London: Lawrence and Wishart.

8) F. Engels, “The Peasant War in Germany,” *op.cit.*, p. 464. * Millenarianism announced the coming of the one thousand years of happiness foreseen by Saint John the Divine in *Revelations*, XX, 1-5.

German neo-Hegelianism – to the relationship between religion and society.

Most twentieth century Marxist studies on religion limit themselves either to commentary on or development of the ideas sketched out by Marx and Engels, or to their application to a particular reality.

Kautsky, Lenin, Luxemburg

This was the case for example with Karl Kautsky's historical studies on primitive Christianity, medieval heresies, Thomas More and Thomas Münzer. While Kautsky provides us with interesting insights and details on the social and economic bases of these movements and their communist aspirations, he usually reduces their religious beliefs to a simple “husk” (Hulle) or “garb” (Gewand) that “conceals” their social content. (9) In his book on the German Reformation, he wastes no time with the religious dimension of the struggle between Catholics, Lutherans and Anabaptists: contemptuous of the “theological squabbles” (theologischen Zänkereien) between this religious movements, he sees as the only task of the historian “to trace back the fights of those times to the contradictions of material interests.” (10)

Many Marxists in the European labour movement were radically hostile to religion but believed that the atheistic battle against religious ideology must be **subordinated** to the concrete necessities of the class struggle, which demands **unity** between workers who believe in God and those who do not. Lenin himself – who very often denounced religion as a “mystical fog” – insisted in his article *Socialism and Religion* (1905) that atheism should not be part of the Party's programme because “unity in the really revolutionary struggle of the oppressed class for creation of a paradise on earth is more important to us than unity of proletarian opinion on paradise in heaven.” (11)

Rosa Luxemburg shared this opinion, but she developed a different and more flexible approach. Although an atheist herself, she attacked in her writings less religion as such than the reactionary policy of the Church – in the name of its own tradition. In an essay written in 1905 (*Church and Socialism*) she claimed that modern socialists are more faithful to the original principles of Christianity than the conservative clergy of today. Since the socialists struggle for a social order of equality, freedom and fraternity, the priests, if they honestly wanted to implement in the life of humanity the Christian principle “love thy neighbor like thine-self,” should welcome the socialist movement. When the clergy support the rich, who exploit and oppress the poor, they are in explicit contradiction to Christian

9) Karl Kautsky, *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus, Erster Band, Kommunistische bewegungen im Mittelalter*, Stuttgart: Dietz Verlag, 1913, pp. 170, 198.

10) Karl Kautsky, *Der Kommunismus in der deutschen Reformation*, Stuttgart: Dietz Verlag, 1921, p. 3.

11) V. I. Lenin, “Socialism and Religion” (1905), *Selected Works*, Moscow, 1972, vol. 10, p.86.

teachings: they serve not Christ but the Golden Calf. The first apostles of Christianity were passionate communists and the Fathers of the Church (like Basil the Great and John Chrysostom) denounced social injustice. Today this cause is taken up by the socialist movement which brings to the poor the Gospel of fraternity and equality, and calls on the people to establish on earth the Kingdom of freedom and neighbor-love. (12) Instead of a philosophical battle in the name of materialism, Rosa Luxemburg tried to rescue the social dimension of the Christian tradition for the labour movement.

Austro-Marxists, like Otto Bauer and Max Adler, were much less hostile to religion than their German or Russian comrades. They seemed to consider Marxism as compatible with some form of religion, but this referred mainly to religion as a “philosophical belief” (of neo-Kantian inspiration) rather than to concrete historical religious traditions. (13)

The Communist International

In the Communist International little attention was paid to religion. A significant number of Christians joined the movement, and a former Swiss Protestant pastor, Jules Humbert-Droz, became during the 1920s one of the main leaders of the Comintern. The dominant idea among Marxists at that time was that a Christian who became a socialist or communist necessarily abandoned his former “anti-scientific” and “idealist” religious beliefs. Bertold Brecht's beautiful theatrical play *Saint Jean of the Slaughterhouses* (1932) is a good example of this kind of simplistic approach towards the conversion of Christians to the struggle for proletarian emancipation. Brecht describes very aptly the process by which Jean, a leader of the Salvation Army, discovers the truth about exploitation and social injustice and dies denouncing her former views. But for him there must be an absolute and total break between her old Christian faith and her new credo of revolutionary struggle. Just before dying, Jean says to the people:

“If ever someone comes to tell you that there exists a God, invisible however, from whom you can expect help, hit him hard in the head with a stone until he dies.”

Rosa Luxemburg's intuition, that one could fight for socialism in the name of the true values of original Christianity, was lost in this kind of crude – and quite intolerant – “materialist” perspective. As a matter of fact, a few years after Brecht wrote this piece, there appeared in France (1936-1938) a movement of revolutionary Christians assembling several thousand activists which actively supported the labour movement, in particular its more radical wing (Marceau Pivert's

12) Rosa Luxemburg, “Kirche und Sozialismus” (1905), in *Internationalismus und Klassenkampf*, Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1971, pp. 45-47, 67-75.

13) On this see David McClellan's interesting and useful book, *Marxism and Religion*, New York: Harper and

left-socialists). Their main slogan was: “We are socialists because we are Christians.” (14)

Gramsci

Among the leaders and thinkers of the Communist movement, Gramsci is probably the one who showed the greatest interest in religious issues. He is also one of the first Marxists who tried to understand the contemporary role of the Catholic Church and the weight of religious culture among the popular masses. His remarks on religion in *Prison Notebooks* are fragmentary, unsystematic and allusive, but at the same time very insightful. His sharp and ironic criticism of the conservative forms of religion – particularly the Jesuitic brand of Catholicism, which he heartily disliked – did not prevent him from perceiving also the utopian dimension of religious ideas:

“Religion is the most gigantic utopia, that is the most gigantic ‘metaphysics,’ that history has ever known, since it is the most grandiose attempt to reconcile, in mythological form, the real contradictions of historical life. It affirms, in fact, that mankind has the same ‘nature,’ that man ... in so far as created by God, son of God, is therefore brother of other men, equal to other men, and free amongst and as other men ... ; but it also affirms that all this is not of this world, but of another (the utopia). Thus do ideas of equality, fraternity and liberty ferment among men... Thus it has come about that in every radical stirring of the multitude, in one way or another, with particular forms and particular ideologies, these demands have always been raised.”

He also insisted on the internal differentiations of the Church according to ideological orientations – liberal, modernist, Jesuitic and fundamentalist currents within Catholic culture – and according to the different **social classes**:

“Every religion ... is really a multiplicity of different and often contradictory religions: there is a Catholicism for the peasants, a Catholicism for the petty bourgeoisie and urban workers, a Catholicism for women, and a Catholicism for intellectuals”

Most of his notes relate to the history and present role of the Catholic Church in Italy: its social and political expression through Catholic Action and the People's Party, its relation to the State and subordinate classes, etc. He was particularly interested in the way traditional intellectuals were recruited and used as instruments of hegemony by the Church:

“Although it has organized a marvellous mechanism of ‘democratic’ selection of its intellectuals, they have been selected as single individuals and not as the representative expression of popular groups.” (15)

Row, 1987, ch. 3.

14) See Agnès Rochefort-Turquin's excellent research, *Socialistes parce que Chrétiens*, Paris: Cerf, 1986.

15) Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison*

Bloch

Gramsci's analyses are rich and stimulating, but in the last analysis, they do not innovate in the **method** of approaching religion. Ernst Bloch is the first Marxist author who radically changed the theoretical framework – without abandoning the Marxist and revolutionary perspective. In a similar way to Engels, he distinguished two socially opposed currents: on one side the theocratic religion of the official churches, opium of the people, a mystifying apparatus at the service of the powerful; on the other the underground, subversive and heretical religion of the Albigensians, the Hussites, Joachim de Flore, Thomas Münzer, Franz von Baader, Wilhelm Weitling and Leo Tolstoy. However, unlike Engels, Bloch refused to see religion uniquely as a “cloak” of class interests – he explicitly criticized this conception, while attributing it to Kautsky only... In its protest and rebellious forms religion is one of the most significant forms of **utopian consciousness**, one of the richest expressions of the **Hope Principle**. Through its capacity of creative anticipation, the Judeo-Christian theology of death and immortality – Bloch's favorite religious universe – marks out the imaginary space of the **not-yet-being**. (16)

Basing himself on these presuppositions, Bloch develops a heterodox and iconoclastic interpretation of the Bible – both the Old and the New Testaments – drawing out the **Biblia pauperum**, that denounces the Pharaohs and calls on each and everyone to choose **aut Caesar aut Christus** (either Caesar or Christ).

A religious atheist – according to him only an atheist can be a good Christian and vice-versa – and a theologian of the revolution, Bloch not only produced a Marxist reading of millenarianism (following Engels in this) but also – and this was new – a **millenarian interpretation of Marxism**, where the socialist struggle for the Kingdom of Freedom is perceived as the direct heir of the eschatological and collectivist heresies of the past.

Of course Bloch, like the young Marx of the famous 1844 quotation, recognized the dual character of the religious phenomenon, its oppressive aspect as well as its potential for revolt. The first requires the use of what he calls “the cold stream of Marxism”: the relentless materialist analysis of ideologies, idols and idolatries. The second one however requires “the warm stream of Marxism,” seeking to rescue religion's **utopian cultural surplus**, its critical and anticipatory

Notebooks, edited by Quentin Hoare and G. Nowell Smith, London: New Left Books, 1971, pp. 405, 328, 397.

16) Ernst Bloch, *Le Principe Espérance*, Paris: Gallimard, 1976, and *L'athéisme dans le christianisme*, Paris: Gallimard, 1978.

17) Max Horkheimer, “Gedanke zur Religion” (1935) in *Kritische Theorie*, Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, 1972, Band I, p. 374.

18) See our article “Revolution against ‘Progress’ : Walter Benjamin's Romantic Anarchism,” *New Left Review*, number 152, November-December 1985.

force. Beyond any “dialogue,” Bloch dreamt of an authentic **union** between Christianity and revolution, like in the Peasant Wars of the sixteenth century.

Bloch's views were, to a certain extent, shared by some of the members of the Frankfurt School. Max Horkheimer considered that “religion is the record of the wishes, nostalgias (Sehnsüchte) and accusations of countless generations.” (17) Erich Fromm, in his book *The Dogma of Christ* (1930), used Marxism and psychoanalysis to illuminate the messianic, plebeian, egalitarian and anti-authoritarian essence of primitive Christianity. And Walter Benjamin tried to combine, in a unique and original synthesis, theology and Marxism, Jewish Messianism and historical materialism. (18)

Goldmann

Lucien Goldmann's work is another path-breaking attempt to renew the Marxist study of religion. Although of a very different inspiration than Bloch, he was also interested in redeeming the moral and human value of religious tradition. In his book *The Hidden God* (1955) he developed a very subtle and inventive sociological analysis of the Jansenist heresy (including Racine's theater and Pascal's philosophy) as a tragic world-view, expressing the peculiar situation of a social layer (the robe nobility) in seventeenth century France. The most surprising and original part of this work is however the attempt to compare – without assimilating one to another – **religious faith** and **Marxist faith**: both have in common the refusal of pure individualism (rationalist or empiricist) and the belief in **trans-individual values** – God for religion, the human community for socialism. A similar analogy exists between the Pascalian **wager** on the existence of God and the Marxist **wager** on the liberation of humanity: both presuppose risk, the danger of failure and the hope of success. Both imply some fundamental faith which is not demonstrable on the exclusive level of factual judgements. What separates them is of course the supernatural or suprahistorical character of religious transcendence. Without wanting in any way to “Christianize Marxism,” Lucien Goldmann introduced a new way of looking at the conflictual relationship between religious belief and Marxist atheism.

Marx and Engels thought religion's subversive role was a thing of the past, which no longer had any significance in the epoch of modern class struggle. This forecast was more or less historically confirmed for a century – with a few important exceptions (particularly in France): the Christian socialists of the 1930s, the worker priests of the 1940s, the left-wing of the Christian unions (the Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens) in the 1950s, etc. But to understand what has been happening for the last thirty years in Latin America – as well as in the Philippines and to a lesser extent in other continents – we need to integrate into our analysis the intuitions of Bloch (and Goldmann) on the utopian potential of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

II. What Is Liberation Theology?

What is liberation theology? Why does it cause concern not only in the Vatican but in the Pentagon, not only among cardinals of the Holy See but among Reagan's advisors? Why did the representatives of Latin American armies assembled in Mar del Plata (Uruguay) in November 1987 think it necessary to issue a (confidential) document analyzing it? Quite obviously because the stakes involved go considerably beyond the framework of traditional ideological or theological debate: for the supporters of the established order – both social and clerical – it is a question of a **practical** challenge to their **power**.

A movement...

As Leonardo Boff has stated, liberation theology is a reflection of, and reflects on, a **previous praxis**. More precisely, it is the expression/legitimation of a vast **social movement**, that emerged at the beginning of the 1960s – well before the new theological writings. This movement involves significant sectors of the Church (priests, religious orders, bishops), lay religious movements (Catholic Action, Christian University Youth, Young Christian Workers), popularly based pastoral interventions (workers pastoral, peasants pastoral, urban pastoral), and the ecclesiastic base communities (CEB). Without the **practice** of this social movement – one could call it **Christianity for liberation** – we cannot understand social and historical phenomena as important as the rise of the revolution in Central America or the emergence of a new workers movement in Brazil.

This movement (here we will examine only its Catholic version, but there also exists a Protestant one) is vigorously opposed by the Vatican and by the Church hierarchy in Latin America – the CELAM (Latin American Bishops' Conference) led by the Colombian bishop Alfonso Lopez Trujillo. Can we say that there is a class struggle inside the Church? Yes and no. Yes, to the extent that certain positions correspond to the interests of the ruling classes and others to those of the oppressed. No, to the extent that the bishops, Jesuits or priests who head the “Church of the Poor” are not themselves poor. Their rallying to the cause of the exploited is motivated by spiritual and moral reasons inspired by their religious culture, Christian faith and Catholic tradition. Furthermore, this moral and religious dimension is an essential factor in the motivations of thousands of Christian activists in the trade unions, neighborhood associations, base communities and revolutionary fronts. The **poor themselves** become conscious of their condition and organize to struggle as

Christians, belonging to a Church and inspired by a faith. If we look upon this faith and religious identity deeply rooted in popular culture, as a simple “husk” or “cloak” of social and economic interests, we fall into the sort of reductionist approach which prevents us from understanding the richness and authenticity of the real movement.

Liberation theology, as a body of writings produced since 1970 by figures like Gustavo Gutierrez (Peru), Rubem Alves, Hugo Assmann, Carlos Mesters, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff (Brazil), Jon Sobrino, Ignacio Ellacuria (El Salvador), Segundo Galilea, Ronaldo Munoz (Chile), Pablo Richard (Chile - Costa Rica), José Miguel Bonino, Juan Carlos Scannone (Argentina), Enrique Dussel (Argentina - Mexico), Juan-Luis Segundo (Uruguay) – to name only some of the best known – is the spiritual product (the term comes, as we know from Marx's *German Ideology*) of this social movement, but in legitimating it, in providing it with a coherent religious doctrine, it has enormously contributed to its extension and reinforcement.

... and a doctrine

Although there are significant differences between these theologians, several basic tenets can be found in most of their writings, which constitute a radical departure from the traditional established doctrine of the Catholic or Protestant Churches. Some of the most important are:

1 - A sharp moral and social indictment of dependent capitalism as an unjust and iniquitous system, as a form of **structural sin**.

2 - The use of the Marxist instrument in order to understand the causes of poverty, the contradictions of capitalism and the forms of class struggle.

3 - The preferential option for the poor and solidarity with their struggle for self-liberation.

4 - The development of Christian base communities among the poor as a new form of Church and as an alternative to the individualist way of life imposed by the capitalist system.

5 - A new reading of the Bible, giving significant attention to passages like *Exodus* – a paradigm of of an enslaved people's struggle for liberation.

6 - The fight against **idolatry** (and not atheism) as the main enemy of religion – i.e. against the new idols of death adored by the new Pharaohs, the new Caesars and the new Herods: Mammon, Wealth, Power, National Security, the State, Military Force, “Western Christian Civilization.”

7 - Historical human liberation as the anticipation

of the final salvation in Christ, the Kingdom of God.

8- A critique of traditional dualist theology as the product of Platonic Greek Philosophy, and not of the Biblical tradition – where human and divine history are distinct but inseparable.

Radical Christianity and liberation theology influence only a minority of the Latin American Churches: in most of them the dominant tendency is rather conservative or moderate. But its impact is far from negligible – particularly in Brazil, where the Episcopal Conference (CNBB), despite insistent pressure from the Vatican, has refused to condemn liberation theology. As a matter of fact the Latin American Church has ceased to appear as a homogeneous corporation. From one country to the other one can find not only different but sometimes entirely opposed orientations: for instance in Argentina, during the military dictatorship and its “dirty war” against “subversion,” the Church sanctioned, by its obsequious silence, the crimes of the regime; it calls now for a “pardon” of the torturers and killers of the Armed Forces, and mobilizes all its strength against the real danger threatening the nation: divorce... Similarly, in Colombia, the Church remains committed body and soul to the oligarchic system, and legitimates in the name of religion the war against atheistic communism. On the other hand, in Brazil, the Church has denounced, since 1970, the military regime – and today continues to support the struggle of workers and peasants for better wages or agrarian reform.

Currents at every level

Inside the Church in each country one can also find opposed tendencies – as in Nicaragua where many priests support the Sandinista revolution, while most bishops side with the contra. One can see a sharp differentiation in the continent-wide institutions too: while CELAM, the Conference of Latin American Bishops, controlled since 1972 by the conservatives, wages an intensive struggle against liberation theology, CLAR, the Conference of Latin American Religious (assembling the religious orders: Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans, etc) does not hide its sympathy for the “Church of the Poor.”

But it would be a very distorted picture to present the Church as divided between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary factions... First of all, many priests, nuns and bishops (as well as lay organizers) are not political at all and react essentially according to moral and religious criteria. Depending on the circumstances, they may be temporarily attracted to one or another position. Moreover, there is a full rainbow of shades between the more extreme stances. One can distinguish at least four tendencies inside the Latin American Churches:

1) A very small group of fundamentalists, defending ultra-reactionary – and sometimes semi-fascist – ideas: for instance, the group “Tradition, Family and Property.”

2) A powerful conservative and traditionalist cur-

rent, hostile to liberation theology and organically linked to the ruling classes (as well as to the Roman Curia): for instance, Monsignor Lopez Trujillo and the CELAM leadership.

3) A reformist and modernizing current (with a certain intellectual autonomy in relation to the Roman authorities), ready to defend human rights and support certain social demands of the poor: this is the position which prevailed at the Puebla Conference in 1979.

4) A small but influential minority of radicals, sympathetic to liberation theology and capable of active solidarity with the popular, workers and peasants movements. Its best known representatives are Bishops (or Cardinals) like Mendez Arceo (Mexico), Pedro Casaldaliga and Paulo Arns (Brazil), Proano (Ecuador). Within this current, the most advanced section is represented by revolutionary Christians: the “Christians for Socialism Movement” and other tendencies which identify with Sandinismo, Camilo Torres or Christian Marxism.

This means that the division inside the Church cannot be reduced to the usual vertical model: “those from below” – popular Christian movements, base communities, Christian trade-unionists – against “those from above”: the hierarchy, bishops and heads of the institution. It is also horizontal, running through the whole clerical body from top down, from the Episcopal Conferences to the religious orders, diocesan clergy and lay movements. But one should not forget that we are dealing with contradictions inside an institution which has nevertheless preserved its unity, not only because all sides involved want to avoid a schism, but also because its religious aims appear as non-reducible to the social or political arena.



III. Origins and Development of Liberation Theology

What are the causes of the emergence of this new current breaking with a long conservative and regressive tradition? Why was it able to develop in the Latin American Church at a given historical moment, namely the early 1960s?

Of the attempts to explain this phenomenon, one of the most significant is the one put forward by Thomas C. Bruneau, a well-known North American specialist of the Brazilian Church: according to him, this particular Church began to innovate because it wanted to preserve its **influence**. Faced with the rise of religious rivals (the Protestant Churches, various sects) and political competition (left-wing movements), with a decline in the recruitment of priests and a financial crisis, the Church elite understood that it had to find a new way and turned to the lower classes. What was at stake, in the last analysis, was the institutional interests of the Church, broadly understood:

“The Church as an institution changed not so much for opportunistic reasons as it did to maintain its influence, which was itself defined by changing normative orientations.” (19)

This type of analysis is not without value but remains basically inadequate, in my opinion. For, on the one hand, it rests on a circular argument: the Church changed because it wanted to keep or broaden its influence, but this influence, in turn, was already being redefined by new normative orientations (towards the dominated classes). The question is, where did these changed orientations originate? Why did the Church no longer conceive its “influence” in the traditional way: through its relations with social elites and political power? The explanation merely shifts the question without providing a real explanation... And on the other hand, Bruneau’s concept of “influence,” even in its broad meaning (inclusive of the whole spiritual dimension), does not account for the profound ethical-religious upheaval which took place – often in the form of genuine conversions – among the social actors (both clergy and lay men and women) who had decided to get involved (sometimes risking their lives) in the new social movement, the **Church of the poor**.

Another useful, though still too one-sided, explanation is that put forward by certain sociologists with links to the Christian left: the Church changed because the **people “took over”** the institution, converted it, and made it act in their interests. (20) This probably corresponds to one aspect of reality – especially in the

Brazilian case – but once again the question arises immediately: why was it possible for the popular classes to “convert” the Church to their cause at a given moment? This sort of analysis also tends to underestimate what Leonardo Boff (elegantly borrowing a Marxist concept) calls “the **relative autonomy** of the ecclesiastical-religious field” (21), that is the cultural and social determinations specific to the Church, without which its “opening to the people” from the 1960s onwards could not be understood.

It seems to me that the approach which accounts most effectively for the emergence of the **Liberation Christianity** social movement and its theological expression in Latin America is the one which takes as its starting point the combination or convergence of changes **inside** and **outside** the Church in the late 1950s.

Internal change and external change

The **internal** change affected the Catholic Church as a whole: it was the development since World War II of new theological currents particularly in Germany (Bultmann, Moltmann, Metz, Rahner) and France (Calvez, Congar, Lubac, Chenu, Duquoc), new forms of social Christianity (the worker priests, Father Lebreton’s humanist economics), a growing openness to the interrogations of modern philosophy and the social sciences. The pontificate of John XXIII (1958-1963) and the Vatican II Council (1962-1965) legitimated and systematized these new orientations, laying the foundation for a new epoch in the history of the Church.

At the same time, a wrenching **social and political change** was underway in Latin America: 1) from the 1950s onwards, the industrialization of the continent (under the guidance of multinational capital) “developed underdevelopment” (in Andre Gunder-Frank’s now famous formula), that is, fostered greater dependency, deepened social contradictions, stimulated the rural exodus and growth of the cities and concentrated a new working class and, more importantly, an immense “paupertariat” in the urban areas. 2) With the Cuban revolution of 1959, a new historical period opened in Latin America characterized by the intensification of social struggles, the appearance of guerrilla movements, a succession of military coups and a crisis of legitimacy of the political system.

It was the **convergence** of these types of changes which created the conditions for the possible emergence

19) Thomas C. Bruneau, “Church and Politics in Brazil: The Genesis of Change,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Cambridge University Press, Number 17, November 1985, pp. 286-29.

20) See for example Luis Alberto Gomez de Souza’s remarkable

work: *Classes Populares e Igreja nos caminhos da historia*, Petropolis: Vozes, 1982, p.240.

21) Leonardo Boff, *Igreja, Carisma e Poder*, Petropolis: Vozes, 1986, p.178.

of the new **Church of the poor**, whose origins, it should be noted, date back to **before** Vatican II. In a symbolic way, one might say that the radical Christian current was born in January 1959 at the moment when Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and their comrades marched into Havana while, in Rome, John XIII issued his first call for the convocation of the Council.

From the periphery to the center

The new social movement arose first among the groupings which were located at the **intersection** of these two sets of changes: in the lay movements (and some members of the clergy) active among student youth, in outlying neighborhoods, the urban and rural trade unions and the base communities. In other words: the process of **radicalization** of Latin American Catholic culture which was to lead to the formation of liberation theology did not start, top-down, from the upper reaches of the Church, as the functionalist analyses pointing to the hierarchy's search for influence would suggest, nor from the bottom up, as argued by certain "populist" interpretations, but **from the periphery to the center**. The categories or social sectors encompassed in the religious-ecclesiastical field that were to become the driving force of renewal were all, in one way or another, marginal or peripheral in relation to the institution: lay preaching and its chaplains, lay experts, foreign priests, religious orders. The first bishops to be affected were generally those with links to one or another of these categories. In some cases, the movement advanced towards the "center" and influenced episcopal conferences (particularly in Brazil), in others, it remained blocked at the "margins" of the institution.

Lay Catholic movements, such as Catholic University Youth, Catholic Workers Youth, Catholic Action, grass-roots educational movements (Brazil) or for the promotion of land reform (Nicaragua), the Federations of Christian Peasants (El Salvador) and above all, the base communities, were, beginning in the 1960s, the social arena in which Christians actively committed themselves to people's struggles, reinterpreted the Gospel in the light of their practice, and, in some cases, were drawn irresistibly towards (several observers use the term "fascinated by") Marxism.

It is no wonder that these movements, "plunged" directly into a society in crisis, were most **permeable** to the social, political and cultural currents of their environment. Several of them began to undergo a **dynamic of autonomization**, comparable to that of the French JEC (Catholic Student Youth) analyzed by Danielle Hervieu-Léger: in the first stage, the Christian activists "fully assumed" the milieu which they intended to win over to the word of God by intensely identifying with its collective aspirations; then came the demand for autonomy, insofar as these profane commitments did not fit in with religious norms; finally, the conflict with the hierarchy exploded when the movement publicly adopted a stand different from the

official position of the Church on one or another social or political question. (22) This was exactly what happened in the Brazilian JUC in the early 1960s, and, as a result of their conflict with the Church, the main leaders and activists of the Christian student movement decided to form a new political organization, of Marxist inspiration, Popular Action (1962). In Chile too, something similar happened with the result that leaders of the JUC and Christian-Democratic Youth formed the United People's Action Movement (MAPU), a (Marxist) party, in 1969.

Another group of lay people who played a key role in the formation of **liberation Christianity** – although they did not go through the same dynamic of autonomization – was that of the teams of **experts** who worked for the bishops and episcopal conferences, preparing briefings and proposing pastoral plans, and sometimes drafting their statements. These economists, sociologists, urban planners, theologians and lawyers constituted a kind of lay intellectual apparatus of the Church, which introduced into the institution the latest developments in the social sciences – which, in Latin America from the 1960s onwards, meant Marxist sociology and economics (dependency theory). The influence of these teams was decisive in formulating certain documents of the Brazilian Episcopate, in preparing the Medellín Conference (1968), and in the very genesis of liberation theology in the early 1970s.

Role of the regular clergy

Within the institution itself, the **religious orders** were in the vanguard of the new practice and theological thinking. This was true in particular of the Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans, Maryknolls, Capuchins and female orders. The religious orders – a total of 157 000 people in all Latin America – are the single largest group staffing the new social pastorals and leading base communities. Most well-known liberation theologians are religious and, as mentioned earlier, the CLAR (Confederation of Latin American Religious, founded in 1959) holds far more radical positions than the CELAM (the Conference of Latin America Bishops). In some countries like Nicaragua, this difference is reflected in more or less open conflict between the bishops and the religious orders, while elsewhere, the secular clergy too has contributed to changing the whole Church.

How can one explain the particularly prominent **commitment** of the orders? One element that must be considered is the **protest** – both against the world and against the Church – involved in the very nature of the monastic utopia itself; in an article written in 1971, Jean Séguéy suggests that this utopian dimension can help us to understand "certain links between Catholic religious orders and revolutionary activity" in Latin America. (23) In addition, religious orders enjoy a certain autonomy within the Church and are less subject to the direct control of the episcopal hierarchy than

the diocesan clergy. Another important factor is the high level of education received by the regular clergy, its familiarity with modern thought and the social sciences, its direct contact with contemporary theology as taught in Louvain, Paris and Germany. Certain orders, such as the Jesuits and Dominicans, are genuine networks of "organic" intellectuals of the Church, engaged in a constant exchange and dialogue with the academic milieu and "profane" intellectual world – a world which, in Latin America, is substantially influenced by Marxist themes.

The last "marginal" group which decisively contributed to the upsurge of **liberation Christianity** is that of the **foreign priests and religious**, notably from the Spanish state, France and North America. For instance, half of the eighty priests of Chile who published a statement in April 1971 endorsing the transition to socialism were foreigners; similar phenomena can be found in Central America (particularly Nicaragua). One possible explanation is **selective self-recruitment**: the priests and religious available for missions to Latin American countries probably represent a sector of the Church that is particularly sensitive to problems of poverty and the Third World. Many of the French missionaries there had participated in, or had first-hand knowledge of the experience of the worker priests, and among the Spaniards there was a high percentage of Basques – coming from a region where the Church has a tradition of resisting the government. An additional reason is the fact that foreign clergy members were often sent by the bishops to the most remote and poorest regions, or to the new shantytowns which proliferated in the large urban areas of the continent – that is, wherever traditional dioceses did not exist. The contrast between the living conditions in their country of origin and the stark poverty they discovered in their mission land caused among many of them a genuine moral and religious **conversion** to the liberation movement of the poor. As noted by Brian H. Smith, an American sociologist, in his important work on the Church in Chile, these foreign priests who were initially inspired only by the same reforming concerns as the bishops:

"had become radicalized by what they had seen and experienced in working-class areas" and therefore "moved decidedly Left in both their theological opinions and social analysis." (24)

From the effervescence of the 1960s...

Nor was the radicalization process that emerged among certain Christian (clerical and/or lay) circles in the 1960s limited to Brazil and Chile; under various forms, analogous developments occurred in other countries too: the most well-known case is of course that of Camilo Torres who organized a militant people's movement and then joined the National Liberation Army (ELN), a Castroist guerrilla movement in Colombia, in 1965. Torres was killed in 1966 in a clash

24) Brian H. Smith, *The Church and Politics in Chile. Challenges to Modern Catholicism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982, p. 248.

with the army but his martyrdom had a deep emotional and political impact on Latin American Christians, leading to the rise of a current that identified with his legacy. Moreover, groups of radicalized priests organized just about everywhere: Priests for the Third World (Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo) in Argentina in 1966, the National Organization for Social Integration (ONIS) in Peru in 1968, Golconda in Colombia also in 1968 – while a growing number of Christians became actively involved in people's struggles. They reinterpreted the Gospel in light of this practice and, sometimes, discovered that Marxism held a key to the understanding of reality and a guide to liberating action.

This great effervescence, coming in the context of renewal that followed the Vatican II Council, finally began to shake the whole Church of the continent and when the bishops met at the CELAM Conference in Medellín, in 1968, new resolutions were adopted which, for the first time, not only denounced existing structures as based on injustice, the violation of the fundamental rights of the people and "**institutionalized violence**," but also recognized that (in certain circumstances) revolutionary insurrection was legitimate, and asserted their solidarity with the people's aspiration to "liberation from all servitude."

... to the new doctrine

Similar phenomena occurred in other regions of the Third World and even Europe (for instance the evolution of the French Democratic Confederation of Labor (CFDT)!) and the United States, but on a lesser scale (with the exception of the Philippines where this current has a mass base). Latin America is the Catholic continent *par excellence*, where the great majority of the population is immersed from birth in Roman Catholic religious culture. But at the same time, it is the weakest link in the Catholic chain because the worsening economic dependency and poverty of the people combined with the victory of the Cuban revolution to cause a wave of social struggles and revolutionary attempts across the continent which have not ceased from 1960 to this day. These were the conditions in which a sector of the Church would eventually decide to embrace the cause of the poor and their struggle for liberation.

The Vatican II Council undoubtedly contributed to this evolution, but one should not forget that the first waves of radicalization (particularly in Brazil) unfolded well before the Council. Furthermore, the Vatican II resolutions failed to go beyond the bounds of a modernization, an *aggiornamento*, an opening to the world. But this opening undermined ancient dogmatic certainties and made Catholic culture permeable to new ideas and "external" influences. In opening itself to the modern world, the Church, particularly in Latin America, could not escape the social conflicts which were shaking this world, nor the influence of various philosophical and political currents – particularly Marxism which, at that time (in the 1960s) was the dominant cultural trend among the intelligentsia of the continent.

This was the context in which **liberation**

22) Danielle Hervieu-Léger, *Vers un nouveau christianisme?* Paris: Cerf, 1986, pp. 312-317.

23) J. Séguéy, "Une sociologie des sociétés imaginées: monachisme et utopie," *Annales ESC*, mars-avril 1971, pp. 337, 354.

theology was born. The most advanced Latin American theologians – dissatisfied with the “development theology” which was dominant in Latin America – began to deal with the theme of liberation as early as the late 1960s. This was true in particular of Hugo Assmann, a Brazilian theologian trained in Frankfurt who played a pioneering role in elaborating the first elements of a Christian and liberationist critique of *desarrollismo* (developmentism) in 1970.

Gustavo Gutierrez

But it was in 1971, with the book of Gustavo Gutierrez – a Peruvian Jesuit and former student of the Catholic universities of Louvain and Lyons – that liberation theology was truly born. In his work entitled *Liberation Theology – Perspectives*, Gutierrez advanced certain anti-establishment ideas that had a profoundly unsettling effect on the doctrine of the Church. In the first place, he stressed the need to break with the dualism inherited from Greek thought: there are not two realities as alleged, one “temporal,” the other “spiritual,” nor are there two histories, one “sacred,” the other “profane.” There is only one history and it is in this human and temporal history that Redemption and the Kingdom of God must be realized. The point is not to wait for salvation from on high: the Biblical Exodus shows us “Man building himself by himself through the historical political struggle.” Exodus is therefore the model for a salvation that is not individual and private but communal and “public,” in which it is not the soul of one individual as such that is at stake, but the redemption and liberation of a whole enslaved people. In this perspective, the poor are no longer an object of pity or charity but, as the Hebrew slaves, the agents of their own liberation.

As for the Church, it must cease to be a cog in the ruling system: following the great tradition of the Biblical prophets and the personal example of Christ, it must oppose the powerful and denounce social injustice.

What does this mean for Latin America? According to Gutierrez, the poor people of the continent are “in exile on their own land,” but at the same time “in a Exodus march towards their redemption.” Rejecting the ideology of development which has “become synonymous with reformism and modernization,” that is, with limited, timid, ineffective measures that only make dependency worse, the Peruvian theologian proclaimed without hesitation that:

“Only the complete destruction of the present state of things, the profound transformation of the ownership system, the coming to power of the exploited class, a social revolution will put an end to this dependency. They alone will allow a transition to a socialist society, or at least will make it possible.” (25)

We should note that this is a far more radical position than the one advocated at that time by the dominant

currents of the Latin American Left (the Communist Parties and left nationalist movements).

Shortly thereafter, in April 1972, the first continent-wide gathering of the **Christians for Socialism** movement inspired by two Chilean Jesuits, the theologian Pablo Richard and the economist Gonzalo Arroyo, and supported by the Mexican bishop Sergio Mendez Arceo, was held in Santiago de Chile. This ecumenical movement composed of Catholics as well as Protestants pushed the logic of liberation theology to its ultimate limit, that is to an attempted synthesis between Marxism and Christianity, for which the Chilean episcopate soon rewarded it with a ban. The final resolution of the 1972 meeting proclaimed the participants’ support, as Christians, for the struggle for socialism in Latin America. One of the paragraphs of this document explains the dialectic of faith and revolution in the following terms:

“Feeling the presence of faith in the very heart of revolutionary praxis allows for a fruitful interaction. Christian faith becomes a critical and dynamic leavening in revolution. Faith intensifies the requirement that the class struggle proceed with determination towards the emancipation of all humanity – in particular those who suffer the harshest forms of oppression. It stresses our aspiration to a total transformation of society rather than a simple transformation of its economic structures. Thus faith brings to the Christians involved in the struggle, and through them, its own contribution to a society qualitatively different from the present one, and to the appearance of the New Man....

“Moreover, revolutionary commitment also fulfills a critical and mobilizing function for the Christian faith. It criticizes the overt as well as more subtle forms of complicity between faith and the ruling culture in the course of history.... Christians who participate in the liberation process are led to vividly understand that the requirements of revolutionary praxis ... force them to rediscover the central themes of the message of the Gospel.... The true context of living faith today is the history of oppression and the struggle for liberation from this oppression. But, to find one’s way in this context, one must really participate in the liberation process by joining parties and organizations that are the authentic instruments of the struggle of the working class.” (26)

Counter-Offensive

At the Conference of Latin American bishops held in Puebla in 1979, a real attempt to get things back under control took place: CELAM, the organizing body of the conference, forbade liberation theologians from attending the conference. They were nevertheless present in the city of Puebla and through the intermediary

26) *Christians and Socialism - Documentation of the Christians for Socialism Movement in Latin America*, New York (Maryknoll): Orbis Books, 1975, p. 173.

of certain bishops had a real influence on the debates; the ensuing compromise was summarized by the now famous formula of “**the Church’s preferential option for the poor**” – a sufficiently general phrase to allow each current to interpret it according to their own inclinations.

Finally in 1981 the Brazilian Franciscan theologian Leonardo Boff unleashed a minor tempest by denouncing, in his book *Church, Charisma, Power*, the authoritarian system of government of the Church, the intolerance and dogmatism of institutions like the Sacred Congregation for the Faith, the “Christian cult of personality of the popes,” and the opportunism of the Church-institution towards victors, whoever they might be. This iconoclastic work earned him a Vatican condemnation to one year of silence.

In an attempt to answer this challenge, Rome issued in 1984 an *Instruction on Some Aspects of “Liberation Theology”* signed by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith which is led by Cardinal Ratzinger; the instruction denounced liberation theology as a new type of heresy based on the use of Marxist concepts. The reactions of Latin American theologians and important sectors of the Church – particularly in Brazil – forced the Vatican to backtrack somewhat. In 1985, a new (apparently) more positive instruction was issued, *Christian Liberty and Liberation*, which retrieved certain themes of liberation theology, but by “spiritualizing” them and stripping them of their social revolutionary content. Around the same time, the Pope sent a letter to the Brazilian Church assuring it of his support and recognizing the legitimacy of liberation theology. With this move, a certain retreat was noted among some Latin American theologians whose documents became more moderate and less influenced by Marxism – yet without giving up the essential core.



Conservative bishops appointed

At the present time, the Vatican’s tactic is not to fight back on the theological terrain (which is not favorable to it in Latin America) but on that of episcopal power: through the systematic appointment of conservative bishops (to replace those who die or retire) Rome hopes to marginalize the radical currents and reassert its control over episcopal conferences deemed by it too advanced – chief among which is the Brazilian CNBB. At the same time, the more committed bishops, like Monsignor Pedro Casaldaliga (based in the Amazon region of Brazil) who is known for his support for the Nicaraguan revolution, have been the targets of warnings and bans. What is happening is a

genuine political and spiritual confrontation of decisive importance for the future of the Church – which does not exclude the possibility of partial concessions, neither of the two partners wanting to take the risk of provoking a break or schism.

Whatever the outcome of this fight, **liberation Christianity**, bolstered by the theologians committed to the cause, has already caused a profound upheaval not only on the religious scene but also on the social and political scene in Latin America.

Base communities grow

As far as the Church is concerned the big change has focused on the upsurge of Base Communities of the Church (Comunidades Eclesiales de Base - CEB), particularly in Brazil where they encompass several million Christians, and, on a smaller scale, throughout the continent. The Base Community is a small group of neighbors who belong to the same popular quarter, shantytown, village or rural zone, and who meet regularly to read the Bible and discuss it in the light of their own life experience. The CEBs are part of a diocese and have more or less regular links with pastoral agents: priests, religious brothers and more often sisters. Little by little the discussions and activities of the community broaden, generally with the assistance of the clergy, and begin to include social tasks: struggles for housing, electricity and water in the shantytowns, the struggle for land in the countryside. In certain cases, the experience of these struggles leads to politicization and to several leaders or members of the CEBs joining class-struggle parties or revolutionary fronts.

The CEBs’ experience has often contributed a new quality to the social and political movements which they have nurtured: roots in the daily life of the popular layers and in their humble and concrete concerns, the encouragement of rank-and-file self-organization, distrust of political manipulation, electoral windbags and state paternalism. This has also sometimes included a negative counterpart: a radical form of “rank-and-filism” or “grass-rootsism” leading to a rejection of theory and to hostility towards vanguard groups. The debate on these questions has been carried on among the theologians themselves, some displaying a more “populist,” others a more “political” sensitivity; the dominant tendency is the search for a practice that transcends both “rank-and-filism” and “vanguardism.”

At any rate, several of the major developments in the struggle of the oppressed and exploited for their liberation in Latin America in the last ten to fifteen years have only been possible thanks to the contribution of the CEBs and liberation theology. This is the case in particular in Brazil and Central America: whatever the future consequences of the present “normalization” policy applied by Rome to the Latin American Catholic Church may be, certain historical realities have already been irreversibly established: the formation of the Workers Party in Brazil, the victory of Sandinismo in Nicaragua and the consolidation of the FMLN in El Salvador. Let us look at each of these three experiences more closely.

A few important dates

- 1959**
Cuba
 Victory of the July 26 Movement
Latin America
 Latin Confederation of Religious (CLAR) founded
- 1960**
Brazil
 Catholic University Youth (JUC) publish *A Few Key Ideas Towards a Historical Ideal for the Brazilian People*
- 1962**
Rome
 Vatican II Ecumenical Council opens
Nicaragua
 Founding of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)
Brazil
 Creation of People's Action (AP) by activists of the JUC and Paulo Freire's Movement for Base Education (MEB)
- 1964**
Brazil
 April: Military coup
 June: Brazilian Bishops' Conference (CNBB) supports military
- 1965**
Rome
 Resolutions voted and end of Ecumenical Council
- 1966**
Argentina
 Founding of Priests for the Third World
Colombia
 Father Camilo Torres who had joined the guerrilla is killed in a clash with the army
- 1967**
Bolivia
 Che Guevara is killed
Brazil
 A group of Dominicans aids Carlos Marighela's guerrilla (National Liberation Action, ALN)
- 1968**
Latin America
 Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) meets in Medellin
- 1969**
Chile
 Creation of Movement for United People's Action (MAPU)
Nicaragua
 San Pablo base community founds the Christian Youth Movement
 Agrarian Advancement Evangelical Committee (CEPA) created by Jesuits
- 1970**
Brazil
 Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns appointed Bishop of São Paulo
- 1971**
Peru
 Gustavo Gutierrez's *Liberation Theology - Perspectives* is published
- 1972**
Chile
 Continent-wide movement Christians for Socialism is founded
- Nicaragua**
 Christian University Movement founded
- El Salvador**
 Rutilio Grande launches missionary work among the peasants
- 1973**
Chile
 September: military coup under Pinochet
Uruguay
 Military coup
Brazil
 Bishops and Provincials of various orders of the Northeast and Center-West publish a document denouncing the military dictatorship and capitalism
Nicaragua
 Revolutionary Christian Movement founded
- 1976**
Argentina
 Military coup
- 1977**
Nicaragua
 Peasant Delegates of the Word found the Association of Rural Workers (ATC)
- 1978**
Nicaragua
 Father Gaspar Garcia Laviana who had joined the FSLN guerrillas is killed in a clash with the National Guard
- 1979**
Brazil
 Foundation of Workers Party (PT)
Latin America
 CELAM bishops meet in Puebla
Nicaragua
 Victory of the Sandinista revolution
- 1980**
El Salvador
 March: Monsignor Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, assassinated
 November: Juan Chacon, a Christian activist and BPR leader, and other FDR leaders assassinated
Nicaragua
 FSLN issues *Declaration on religion*
- 1981**
Brazil
 Leonardo Boff publishes *Church, Charisma and Power*
- 1984**
Rome
Instruction on Some Aspects of Liberation Theology
 Three Nicaraguan priests holding governmental posts in Nicaragua suspended *a divinis* by the pope
- 1985**
Rome
Instruction on Christian Liberty and Liberation
Cuba
 Conversation of Fidel Castro with Frei Betto on religion
- 1988**
Brazil
 The newly elected São Paulo city council under Luiza Erundian, of the Workers Party, appoints Paulo Freire director of schools.

IV. The Brazilian Church

The Brazilian Church is a unique case in Latin America, insofar as it is the only Church on the continent where liberation theology and its pastoral followers won a decisive influence. The importance of this fact is obvious, considering that this is the largest Catholic Church in the world. Moreover, the new Brazilian popular movements – the radical trade-union confederation (CUT), the landless peasant movements, the poor neighborhood associations – and their political expression, the new **Workers Party** (Partido dos Trabalhadores - PT), are to a significant extent the product of the grass-roots activity of committed Christians, lay pastoral agents and base Christian communities.

Traditionally the Brazilian Church had been rather conservative and a bulwark of fervent anti-communism. Two examples may illustrate how radical was the change of its position in the field of class struggle:

Gregorio Bezerra, a well-known Brazilian Communist leader, recounts in his memoirs how, during a meeting in a small town in the North-East, around 1946 (when the Communist Party was legalized) he was threatened by a fanatical mob, led by the local priest, shouting "Death to communism! Long live Christ the king!" The Communist leader was forced to run for his life and finally took refuge at the local police headquarters, in order to escape from this obscurantist horde. Thirty five years later, we have exactly the reverse scenario: during a metalworkers' strike in 1980, a demonstration of trade-unionist of São Bernardo (an industrial suburb of São Paulo) is attacked by the police, and forced to take refuge at the Church opened by the Bishop in order to receive them....

How did this change take place? By the late 1950s one can already perceive the emergence of different currents among the Bishops and the clergy. The three most influential were the traditionalists, the conservative modernizers and the reformists: all shared a common repulsion for "atheistic communism." The most progressive figure was Dom Helder Camara, archbishop of Olinda, who represented the "theology of development" at its best and who raised the issue of the dramatic poverty among the people of the North-East.

Early 1960s

In the early 1960s, there appeared an entirely new tendency, soon to be known as the "Catholic Left." Under the influence of recent French theology, Father Lebrét's humanist economics, Emmanuel Mounier's personalist socialism, and the Cuban revolution – the Catholic student movement, the JUC, became radicalized and moved very quickly towards leftist and socialist ideas. In a pioneering document presented in 1960 – *Some Guidelines of an Historical Ideal for the Brazilian*

People – several leaders of the JUC denounced the evils of capitalism:

"We have to say, without ambiguity or hesitation, that capitalism, historically realized, deserves only the serene condemnation of Christian consciousness. Is it necessary to justify this? It will be enough to recall here some of the alienations of the human person characteristic of the concrete capitalist situation: reduction of human labor to the condition of a commodity; dictatorship of private property, not subordinated to the demands of the common good; abuses of economic power; unbridled competition on one side, and monopolistic practices of all kinds on the other; central motivation in the spirit of profit."

The Catholic students called for the "replacement of the anarchic economy, based on profit, by an economy organized according to the total perspectives of the human person" – an aim which concretely requires the "nationalization of the basic productive sectors." Although the document has plenty of quotes from Thomas Aquinas, Pope Leo XIII and Emmanuel Mounier, it clearly uses Marxist concepts and points towards the need of a socialist transformation of Brazilian society.

Approximately at the same time, Catholic activists, with the support of the Church, formed the Movement for Base Education (MEB) which was the first Catholic attempt at a radical pastoral practice among the popular classes. Under the guidance of Paulo Freire's pedagogy, MEB aimed not only to bring literacy to the poor, but to raise their consciousness and help them become the agents of their own history. In 1962 JUC and MEB activists created Popular Action (Ação Popular - AP), a political movement committed to the struggle for socialism and using the Marxist method.

Military coup

The Brazilian Catholic Left of the 1960s developed the first uniquely Latin-American theology, and it was a true forerunner of Liberation Theology. However, unlike the Church of the Poor in the 1970s, it was an "elite" movement, with a limited mass following and it was soon attacked and de-legitimated by the hierarchy. After 1964 AP moved away not only from the Church but also from Christianity (although it still enjoyed the support of many Christians, both lay and clerical), and the majority of its members joined the Maoist Partido Comunista do Brasil (PCdoB).

In April 1964, the military took power, in order to save "Western Christian Civilization" from "atheistic communism," i.e. to defend the capitalist order threatened by the rise of social movements under the elected president João Goulart. In June 1964, the Bishops'

conference (Conferencia nacional dos Bispos Brasileiros - CNBB) issued a statement supporting the coup.

However a significant minority of priests (and some bishops) as well as many religious and lay Church people opposed the military dictatorship. Some of them became radicalized and, during 1967-1968, a large group of Dominicans moved to support armed resistance and to help the guerrilla group led by Carlos Marighella (the Action for National Liberation - ALN), by hiding its members or helping some of them to escape from the country. Soon several of them would be imprisoned and tortured by the military, and the guerrilla movement destroyed.

The turn

While military repression against committed Church people increased - many priests, nuns, religious, lay activists, Catholic Workers Youth (JOC) members were arrested, tortured, raped and sometimes killed - the hierarchy remained silent. The main leader of the Church, Dom Agnelo Rossi, the Cardinal of São Paulo, obstinately refused to condemn torture, criticize the military or defend the victimized Christians. He continued to ignore the situation even after the Vatican's Peace and Justice Commission published a documented report on repression and torture in Brazil and after Pope Paul VI himself spoke out against torture. Finally Dom Agnelo Rossi was "promoted" to a high position in Rome and replaced in 1970 by a new bishop, Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns, who became one of the most outspoken critics of the military and a staunch supporter of the base communities. At the same time, the CNBB, under a new leadership - Dom Ivo Lorscheider - started also to raise its voice against the terrible violations of human rights by the military dictatorship. From that moment on, the Church became a staunch opponent of the regime and a refuge for all forms of popular protest against it.

In 1973, the bishops and provincial leaders of the various religious orders in the North-East and Center-West areas of Brazil issued two statements which denounced not only the dictatorship but also what they called "the root of evil": capitalism. These documents were, as a matter of fact, the most radical statements ever issued by a group of bishops anywhere in the world... The model of development imposed by the regime and the ruling classes - savage capitalism expanding in the rural areas and expelling the peasants from their land, growing social inequality and economic dependence, costly and "Pharaonic" development projects (nuclear power plants, Transamazonian highways) - came under growing critical fire from the CNBB, which also denounced the numerous cases of torture and murder of opponents of the military government. During the 1970s, after the guerrillas were defeated and before the new labor movement emerged, the Church appeared as the main adversary of the dictatorship and was denounced by the top brass of the army as subversive and Marxist-inspired - as well as utopian, feudal and backward, because of its opposition to "modernization" and (capitalist) "progress."

Also during this period, the CEBs began to grow, under the impulse of a large number of priests and religious, and with the support of the radical bishops. The female religious orders were not only the most numerous - there are thirty seven thousand sisters in Brazil - but also the single most effective factor in the promotion of communities in the poor urban neighborhoods. As a result, at the end of the decade there existed some one hundred thousand Christian base communities, with some two to three million participants.

During these years, one can also see the emergence of a new cultural and religious force: Brazilian Liberation Theology. Its first representative was, as mentioned above, Hugo Assmann, who began to link Christian motives with the Marxist philosophy of praxis. Inspired by his experience of work among the urban poor, and by his profound knowledge of Marxism - both of European (Frankfurt!) and Latin American (dependency theory) - Assmann's writings of 1970-1971 are among the most radical and coherent documents produced by Liberation Theology. Assmann was forced into exile but soon other theologians emerged: the best known are the two brothers Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, who belong to the Franciscan and the Redemptorist Orders. Through their writings - and through their publishing house (Vozes of Petropolis) - they provided spiritual and political guidance to the Church of the people, and educated a whole generation of pastoral agents, base community leaders, seminar students and Catholic intellectuals. Outspoken in their use of Marxist categories, Leonardo and Clodovis are supported by several Brazilian bishops who are sympathetic to socialist ideas.

CEBs impact

The grass-roots CEBs and the pastoral activists of the Church - belonging to the workers' pastoral, the land pastoral, the urban pastoral - provided the grass-roots constituency for the new social and political movements which arose after the so-called opening of the military regime (1979-1980). It is thanks to this mass base that during the partial re-democratization of the country in the 1980s, the United Workers Central (CUT), the new class-struggle trade-union federation, became hegemonic in the labor movement - as against the pro-government (and Communist Party-supported) General Confederation of Workers (CGT) - organizing around ten million urban and rural workers, while the PT, the new workers party committed to socialism, won hundreds of thousands of members and millions of voters - its candidate, Luiza Erundina, a woman who calls herself a Christian Marxist, has just been elected mayor of São Paulo, the largest city in Latin America (November 1988).

It is true, as we already mentioned, that among many CEB people and pastoral agents there is a very strong "grass-rootsist" or "rank-and-file" tendency, leading to localism, a slow pace of organization, mistrust of "outsiders" and intellectuals and a low level of politicization. This has been criticized by Liberation Theologians (like Clodovis Boff and Frei Betto) and

Marxist activists. But there is also a healthy aspect in the political culture of the base communities: a democratic grass-roots practice and a legitimate suspicion of bourgeois or populist demagoguery - as well as of authoritarian or bureaucratic practices of certain leftist groups. In any case, CEB activists, with the support of radical theologians and bishops helped to build the largest and most radical mass (urban and rural) labor movement in the history of Brazil.

"Normalization"

Although the Pope seemed to support the Brazilian Church in the letter he sent to the Bishops in 1986, the policy of the Vatican in the last three years has been a systematic attempt to "normalize" it (in the Czechoslovakian sense of the word...). As the French Jesuit Father Charles Antoine wrote in a recent article ("Le démantèlement d'une Eglise," *Actualités Religieuses du Monde*, November 15, 1988), this policy is trying to "break-up" the Brazilian Church by nominating conservative bishops who often destroy or weaken the pastoral structures established by their predecessors. The best known example is the nomination of Mgr. José Cardoso, a conservative who specializes in canon law and lived in Rome from 1957 to 1979, to the vacancy left by Dom Helder Câmara. Once nominated, Monsignor Cardoso dismissed most of the leaders of the rural and popular pastorals of his diocese... For the moment, this tactic (as well as the parallel method of putting pressure on the most committed bishops, like Monsignor Pedro Casaldaliga) has failed to produce a realignment of the CNBB with Rome, but it cannot be excluded that it will yield the desired results in the future.

Particularities of Brazilian Church

Why is it that the Brazilian Church has become the most advanced in the continent, the first one where leftist ideas emerged (since 1960), and the only one where Liberation Theology has such a wide influence?

It is difficult to give a clear-cut answer to this question. There are probably several factors which have to be taken into consideration, and whose combination produced the unique characteristics of Brazilian Catholicism:

1- The growing insufficiency of the clergy, too small to control the vast and quickly expanding population of the country. This had as a result the growing influence and importance of the lay members, and in particular of Catholic Action - which was precisely the dynamic factor in the radicalization of the 1960s.

2- The deep influence of the French Catholic Church and culture on Brazil - in opposition to the rest of the continent, where the Spanish (and Italian) tradition was predominant. But France happens to be the country where the most radical developments in Christian (particularly Catholic) culture have arisen throughout the twentieth century: Charles Péguy's religious socialism, Emmanuel Mounier and the *Esprit* group, the Christian Socialists of the Popular Front, the anti-fascist Christians of the Resistance (*Témoignage*

Chrétien), the new post-war theology (Calvez, Chénu, Duquoc, Lubac, etc), Father Lebret's humanist economics, the worker-priests and the leftist turn of the Catholic Youth (JUC, JEC) and Catholic unions (CFTC) during the 1950s and 1960s. Given the direct links between French and Brazilian religious orders (particularly the Dominicans), the great number of French missionaries in Brazil and the traditional influence of French Catholic intellectuals on their Brazilian counterparts, there existed in the Brazilian Church a cultural environment much more receptive to new radical ideas than in the other Latin American countries.

3- The military dictatorship established in 1964. By progressively closing all the institutional channels for the expression of popular protest (particularly after 1968) the military regime ended by transforming the Church into the last refuge of opposition. The popular movements went massively into the Church and helped to "convert" it to the cause of liberation of the poor. At the same time the military's brutal repression of the radical sectors of the Church forced the institution as a whole to react and created a dynamic of permanent conflict between the State and the Church.

It should be however stressed that the dictatorship in itself is not a sufficient explanation, since in other countries (Argentina!) it enjoyed the whole-hearted support of the Church. Although the Brazilian Bishops supported the military coup of 1964, the presence of a significant radical current created the conditions for the change in 1970.

4- The speed and depth of the capitalist development since the 1950s has been much greater in Brazil than in other Latin American countries. The dizzying intensity of urbanization and industrialization, the swiftness and brutality of capitalist expansion in the rural areas created such an aggravation of social contradictions - such as growing social inequality, the expulsion of the rural population from the land, the massive concentration of a poor population on the periphery of the urban centers - that it certainly contributed to the upsurge of liberation Christianity as a radical answer to this harmful and disastrous model of capitalist "modernization."

5- The radical priests and theologians of the 1970s and the 1980s, learning the lessons from the the 1960s - and from what happened in some Latin-American countries - opted for a patient work *inside* the institution, trying not to cut themselves off from the bishops (being therefore able to win some of them for Liberation Theology) and avoiding initiatives which could lead to their isolation and marginalization. While avoiding concessions on their basic options, they refused a dynamic of internal confrontation with the hierarchy, and concentrated their efforts on developing grass-roots organization, base communities and popular pastorals.

The best way to describe the history of the radical current of the Brazilian Church is perhaps to recount the story of a figure who played a key role in developing the political awareness of the Base Communities: Frei Betto - a Dominican religious known worldwide

since he published a series of talks with Fidel Castro on religion which have been translated into fourteen languages and gone through multiple editions in Latin America.

Frei Betto

Born in 1944 in the city of Belo Horizonte (State of Minas Gerais), Betto – whose real name is Carlos Alberto Libânio Christo – became a leader of the Catholic Student Youth (JEC) in the early 1960s. He then entered the Dominican Order as a novice; at the time, the Order was one of the main places where a libertarian interpretation of Christianity was being elaborated. Shocked by the poverty of the people and the military dictatorship established by the coup of 1964, he linked up with a network of Dominicans who actively sympathized with the guerilla movement. When repression intensified in 1969, Betto helped many revolutionary activists hide or quietly cross the border into Uruguay or Argentina. This activity earned him a prison sentence from the military regime which he served from 1969 to 1973. His letters from prison testify to his courageous spiritual resistance in a situation of defeat and repression.

In a fascinating book published recently in Brazil – *Batismo de Sangue. Os dominicanos e a morte de Carlos Marighela* of which already nine editions have been printed since its publication in 1987! – he reviews this period at length, sketching the portrait of the ALN leader assassinated by the police in 1969, and that of his Dominican friends caught in the claws of the repressive machine, imprisoned and subjected to torture. One of the most interesting scenes is the one in which Betto describes his own interrogation by a thug of the dictatorship:

“–How can a Christian collaborate with a communist?”

– For me, men are not divided into believers and atheists, but between oppressors and oppressed, between those who want to keep this unjust society and those who want to struggle for justice.”

– Have you forgotten that Marx considered religion to be the opium of the people?

– It is the bourgeoisie which has turned religion into an opium of the people by preaching a God, lord of the heavens only, while taking possession of the earth for itself.”

The last chapter is dedicated to the tragic figure of Frei Tito de Alencar, so atrociously tortured by the Brazilian police that, even after his release from jail, he could not recover his psychic balance. In exile in France, he still believed himself persecuted by his tormentors and eventually committed suicide in August 1974.

In a novel published at the same time (1987) – *O dia de Angelo* – Frei Betto recounts the life and death of a Christian newspaperman who was imprisoned by the military regime and put to the “question.” The conclusion of the book describes with biting irony an “informal” meeting of the liberal opposition party leadership – now in the government – where a decision is taken to

“let bygones be bygones” and grant an amnesty to the torturers.

As soon as he was released from prison in 1973, Frei Betto devoted himself to organizing base communities; in the next few years, he published several pamphlets explaining in simple and accessible language the meaning of liberation theology and the role of the CEBs. He soon became one of the main leaders of the national inter-Church gatherings where base communities from all over Brazil exchanged their social, political and religious experiences. In 1980 he organized the Fourth International Congress of Third World Theologians.



Since 1979 Frei Betto has been in charge of the workers pastoral division at São Bernardo do Campo, an industrial suburb of São Paulo, the birthplace of the new Brazilian trade unionism. Although he has not officially joined any political organization, he does not hide his sympathies for the Workers Party and his friendship for its president, Luis Inacio da Silva (“Lula”), a former leader of the São Bernardo metalworkers union. In addition to his trips to Cuba, Frei Betto has traveled on many occasions to Nicaragua, where he participates in the activities of the Antonio Valdivieso Ecumenical Research Center founded by Christians who support the Sandinista revolution. Recently, he has visited the Soviet Union, together with the Boff brothers, and is following with interest its most recent developments.

Contrary to other liberation theologians, Frei Betto does not consider Marxism as an “analytical tool” only, a method for the social sciences: rather he perceives its total richness, at once science and utopia, theory and practice. This enables him to locate the convergence between Christians and Marxists on the most decisive field of all: that of revolutionary commitment.

There remains of course the contradiction between Marxist atheism and Christian faith. To those among us (Marxists and atheists) who would tend to view it as principled, one should answer as Frei Betto: men are not divided between believers and non-believers, but between oppressors and oppressed.

V. Christianity and Sandinismo in Nicaragua

1) Until the fall of Somoza

The Nicaraguan revolution is the first in modern times (since 1789) in which Christians – lay people and clergy – have played an essential role, both at the grass-roots and leadership levels of a revolutionary movement.

Before the Medellin conference (1968), the Nicaraguan Church was a very traditionalist and socially conservative institution, which openly supported the sinister Somoza dictatorship. In 1950 its bishops issued a statement proclaiming that all authority derives from God and that Christians must therefore obey the established government. When Anastasio Somoza was killed in 1956 by the poet Rigoberto Lopez, the bishops paid homage to the deceased tyrant by nominating him “Prince of the Church.” One could multiply such examples...

The first signs of change came thanks to a young Spanish priest, Father José de la Jara, who had been influenced by the pioneering experience of a new pastoral community in the neighboring country of Panama. The experiment had been implemented at the parish of San Miguelito by an American priest, Father Leo Mahon from Chicago, a man who believed that the missionaries in Latin America should be “revolutionaries, not ‘modernizers’.”(27)

San Pablo and Solentiname

With the help of Maryknoll sister Maura Clark (who was to be killed in El Salvador in 1980) – and other sisters from various religious orders: Assumptionist, Theresian, Holy Heart of Jesus – José de la Jara started the first “base communities” at the parish of San Pablo, in the outskirts of Managua. Following the example of San Miguelito, he wanted to show that the parish was not above all a Church building or a territory, but a community of brothers and sisters, a “Family of God.” The people, the laity, were to participate actively in Church life, by reading and discussing the Bible in a kind of “Socratic dialogue” with the priest or lay celebrant. There was little political content in the curriculum (*cursillos*) of initiation, but the community gave its members – particularly the women – a feeling of personal dignity and collective initiative. The first result of this activity was the *Misa Popular Nicaraguense*, written and sung by the community.

27) From a statement issued by three American priests (Mahon, Greeley and McGlenn) from San Miguelito, Panama, in January 1964. See “A Missão da Igreja na América Latina,” *Revista Civilização Brasileira*, n° 3, Julho 1965, Rio de Janeiro, p. 315.

In 1968 some other parishes asked San Pablo for help in forming similar communities. Among them was the community of Solentiname, founded by Father Ernesto Cardenal. Father José de la Jara visited these new communities and suggested that they read and discuss the Gospel, as in Managua.

After the Medellin conference, there was a much broader development of the CEBs, which spread to several poor shantytowns in Managua and to the countryside – as well as a growing radicalization. The religious orders – particularly the women’s orders – were very active in this process, with the help of many foreign brothers and sisters; the most committed were the Maryknolls, the Capuchins (who developed communities in the eastern and northern part of the country), the Jesuits and the Assumptionists.

Contact with the Front

In 1969 the San Pablo community in Managua decided to create a Christian Youth Movement, which was to radicalize very quickly; in the early 1970s many of its members became activists or sympathizers of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN). The Marxist guerilla movement founded in the early 1960s by Carlos Fonseca and Tomas Borge eagerly received these young Christian radicals, without trying to impose any ideological conditions on them.

Meanwhile at the Catholic University (UCA – Universidad Centro-Americana) some teachers – the Franciscan Uriel Molina and the Jesuit Fernando Cardenal (Vice-rector of the UCA) – began a dialogue with the Marxist students linked to the FSLN. Some Christian students from the UCA decided in 1971 to live in the parish of Father Uriel Molina, the “El Riguero” neighborhood in Managua, and to share the community life of the poor. They formed the Christian University Movement, which soon established links with the FSLN while remaining independent. Finally, in 1973, priests (including Fernando Cardenal) and students from the UCA and from the *barrios* of East Managua formed the Christian Revolutionary Movement; several hundred of them soon joined the Sandinistas. The first Christian cell of the FSLN was formed with the participation of Luis Carrion, Joaquin Cuadra, Alvaro Baltodano and Roberto Gutierrez, who would all become important leaders in the Front.

Delegates of the Word

In the countryside the Capuchins and Jesuits helped to create a lay leadership, the *Delegates of the Word* (*Delegados de la Palabra*), in order to celebrate certain sacraments in the rural areas not regularly served by a priest. They were trained to provide not only

religious services but also literacy courses, health and agricultural information, and they organized community meetings around Biblical texts, where the problems of the community were debated. In order to educate the Delegates of the Word, the Jesuits created in 1969 the Evangelical Committee for Agrarian Advancement (Comité Evangelico de Promocion Agraria - CEPA), which was active in the areas of Carazo, Masaya, Leon, Esteli – future strongholds of the insurgency. This grass-roots activity of priests, religious and lay Catholics flourished outside the direct control of the bishops.

The theological and political radicalization of the Delegates of the Word, and their frequent victimization by Somoza's National Guard, led many of them to the FSLN. In 1977 several of these peasant leaders formed a rural union, the Association of Workers of the Countryside (Asociacion de Trabajadores del Campo - ATC), which cooperated with the Sandinistas. By 1978, the CEPA cut its formal links with the Church and became an independent Christian organization, also allied to the FSLN.

Similar, although less radical activities also took place among the Protestants. After the earthquake of 1972 Protestant leaders created an Evangelical Committee for Aid and Development (CEPAD), which engaged in human rights activities and became increasingly hostile to the Somoza regime. There were also Protestant pastors who supported the Sandinistas.

Repression and radicalization

A growing number of Christians began to join the fighting units of the Front. In 1977, several young people from the Solentiname community of Ernesto Cardenal took part in an attack by the FSLN against the San Carlos Barracks of the National Guard. In reprisal the Somoza Army destroyed the community and burnt it to the ground. The same year, a Spanish-born priest, Father Gaspar Garcia Laviana, a Missionary of the Sacred Heart who had arrived in Nicaragua in 1970, joined the FSLN. In a letter dated December 1977, he explained his decision by referring to the Medellin resolution which said:

"Revolutionary insurrection can be legitimate in the case of a clear and persistent tyranny which gravely endangers fundamental human rights and greatly harms the common good of the nation, whether this tyranny originates in one individual or in clearly unjust structures."

In a second letter, in 1978, Father Laviana wrote:

"My faith and my belonging to the Catholic Church oblige me to take an active part in the revolutionary process with the FSLN. Because the liberation of an oppressed people is an integral part

28) Comandante Padre Gaspar Garcia Laviana, *Folleto Populares Gaspar Garcia Laviana*, n° 8, Managua: Instituto Historico Centro Americano, n.d.

29) Quoted in Philip Berryman, *The Religious Roots of Rebellion. Christians in Central American Revolutions*, New York (Maryknoll): Orbis Books, 1984, p. 77.

of Christ's total redemption. My active contribution in this process is a sign of Christian solidarity with the oppressed and those who struggle to free them." (28)

On December 11, 1978, Father Gaspar Garcia Laviana was killed in an encounter with the National Guard.

As the crisis of the dictatorship deepened, the Church hierarchy became increasingly critical of Somoza. On January 6, 1978, the Nicaraguan Bishops Conference issued a "Message to the People of God," saying:

"We cannot remain silent when the largest part of our population suffers inhuman living conditions as a result of a distribution of wealth that is unjust by any standard... when the death and disappearance of many citizens in city and country remains a mystery... when the citizens' right to choose their authorities is falsified in the game of political parties..." (29)

A few days later Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, editor of *La Prensa*, and one of the main leaders of the liberal opposition to Somoza, was assassinated: this was to be the beginning of the end for the dictatorship.

Although opposed to the regime, the bishops refused to give any kind of support to the FSLN. Monsignor Obando y Bravo, the Archbishop of Managua, declared in his message of August 1978:

"Violence not only threatens to make more remote the possibility of building the Kingdom of God based on brotherhood and justice but also is self-defeating for those who would use it... To think of resolving our antagonisms once and for all by means of escalation, be it in the form of government repression or revolutionary insurrection, would only plunge our society into an abyss of blood and destruction with incalculable consequences for our social and spiritual life." (30)

No distinction is made in this statement between government repression and revolutionary insurrection – both are rejected in the name of "non-violence."

In the insurrection

However, a very large number of Christians – particularly youth and poor people – ignored the Archbishops' advice, and actively took part in the insurrection – or rather the series of local insurrections of 1978-1979 which led up to the final upsurge in Managua, the flight of Somoza and the victory of the Sandinistas on July 19, 1979. A famous photograph taken by Susan Maisellas during the street fightings shows a *muchacho* with a large cross hanging from his neck, hurling a Molotov cocktail at a National Guard tank... The areas where the struggle was most intense and the action best organized and effective, were precisely those where CEBs, Delegates of the Word and radical

30) Quoted in Michael A. Gismondi, "Transformations of the Holy, Religious Resistance and Hegemonic Struggles in the Nicaraguan Revolution", *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 13, number 3, Summer 1986, p. 28.

Christians had been active in the preceding years: Monimbo, Masaya, Chinandega, Leon, Matagalpa, Esteli, the eastern barrios of Managua and Open Tres, a poor shantytown on the outskirts of the capital. Moreover, many priests, religious (particularly Capuchins and Jesuits) and nuns gave direct help to the Sandinistas, providing them with food, shelter, medicine and ammunition. And finally, the widely respected "Group of Twelve," which supported the FSLN and helped it achieve national and international legitimacy, included not only two priests – Fernando Cardenal and Miguel d'Escoto – but also several well-known lay Catholic figures like Roberto Argüello, Carlos Tünnerman, Rinaldo Antonio Tefel and Emilio Baltodano.

2) After the Sandinista victory of July 1979

Something happened in Nicaragua that never happened before: Christians (both lay and clergy) were not only active in the insurrection against Somoza, but participated in the new revolutionary government set up in its wake, along with Marxists.

The Sandinista Front acknowledged this novelty in its Declaration on Religion of October 7, 1980:

"Christians have been an integral part of our revolutionary history to a degree unprecedented in any other revolutionary movement of Latin America and possibly the world... Our experience has shown that it is possible to be a believer and a committed revolutionary at the same time, and that there is no irreconcilable contradiction between the two."

A new slogan was born, that the Sandinista crowds would chant again and again:

"Entre Cristianismo y Revolucion no hay contradiccion!"

[Between Christianity and revolution there is no contradiction!]

Of course, not all Christians supported the revolution. The Church was divided (after a short "period of grace") between those who are, as one says in Nicaragua, *con el proceso* (with the revolutionary process unfolding after July 1979, and leading to socialism) and those who oppose it. While most bishops became hostile to "communist Sandinismo," the great majority of the religious orders (in particular the Jesuits and Maryknoll) sided with the FSLN. The diocesan clergy was divided between the two options, with the greater number supporting the bishops.

Three priests in the government

The most visible Christian figures in the revolutionary camp were of course the three priests who became ministers in the Sandinista Government:

Ernesto Cardenal, born in 1925, was consecrated priest in 1965. At first a follower of the famous American Catholic theologian Thomas Merton – with whom he lived in the Trappist Convent of Gethsemany in Kentucky (1957-1958) – he returned to Nicaragua and founded the community of Solentiname in 1966. A well-known poet, Cardenal visited Cuba in the early 1970s and became increasingly radical. After the destruction of Solentiname he went into exile in Costa Rica and joined the FSLN (1977). In 1979 he became Minister of Culture.

Fernando Cardenal, his brother, a Jesuit priest since 1968, lived one year among the poor in Medellin (Colombia) in 1969. In 1970 he was appointed vice-rector of the UCA in Managua by the Jesuit Order. Founder of the Revolutionary Christian Movement in 1973, he became a sympathizer of the Sandinistas. In 1979 he became the head of the Literacy Crusade, and in 1984 Minister of Education.

CRISTIANOS REVOLUCIONARIOS II



FOLLETOS POPULARES
GASPAR GARCIA LAVIANA

No.4

Miguel d'Escoto was born in Hollywood, California, in 1933 and educated in the U.S., where he joined the Maryknoll Order. As a missionary in Santiago, Chile, he worked with the poor from 1963 to 1969. From 1970 to 1979 he lived in the U.S. as Director of Social Communications of the Maryknoll Society. Since 1979 he has been Minister of Foreign Relations.

For some time another priest, Edgar Parrales, a Franciscan, was Minister of Social Welfare. Also many other Ministers and high ranking officials of the revolutionary government are well-known lay Catholic figures: Roberto Argüello, Carlos Tünnerman, Reinaldo Tefel, Emilio Baltodano, María del Socorro Gutierrez, Vidaluz Meneses, Francisco Lacayo, etc.

Active institutions

Christians who are *con el proceso* are organized in several structures:

- the Antonio Valdivieso Ecumenic Center (including Catholics and Protestants), founded in August 1979 by Franciscan Father Uriel Molina and Baptist Minister José Miguel Torres. It organizes meetings, conferences, publications and research projects.

- The Central American University (Universidad Centro-Americana - UCA), run by the Jesuits.

- The Historical Institute for Central America (IHCA), led by the Jesuit Alvaro Argüello. In 1980 the Institute published a series of very radical pamphlets presenting a Christian revolutionary perspective, the *Folletos Populares Gaspar Garcia Laviana*. It also publishes a widely respected monthly bulletin of information, *Envio*.

- Although non-confessional, the journal *Pensamiento Propio*, edited by Jesuit Xavier Gorrostiaga (of Basque origin), is also linked to the pro-Sandinista Christian tendency. It has an important role because of its highly competent and independent analysis of developments in Nicaragua and Central America.

- The ACLEN, Association of the Nicaraguan Clergy, also led by Alvaro Argüello. It was dissolved by the bishops in 1983...

- The most important of all: several hundred base communities, in the provinces and in Managua. Some of them are coordinated in local networks, like the Inter-Community Bloc for Christian Welfare (BIBC) in the north-eastern region (Leon-Chinandega).

On the Atlantic Coast (where American Capuchin bishops are present) and in Esteli (which has a moderately progressive bishop), there is no conflict between the hierarchy and the CEBs. But in Managua the base communities, which are active in the poor neighborhoods and very politicized, are the target of open hostility from Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo.

Influence on Sandinismo

This active Christian participation - which also includes many Protestants: in 1980, some 500 ministers signed a statement offering cooperation to the revolutionary process - deeply influenced Sandinismo itself, as an ideology composed of Sandino's radical agrarian nationalism, revolutionary Christianity and the

Guevarista brand of Latin-American Marxism. The language, symbols, images and culture of Sandinismo are often borrowed from the Gospel: this can be seen both at the grass-roots of the movement and in the speeches of some of the main FSLN leaders like Luis Carrion and Tomas Borge. The practice of the Front has been influenced by Christian ideals as well: for instance, in the principle proclaimed by Tomas Borge - "Our vengeance is forgiveness." The Nicaraguan revolution abolished capital punishment and became the first modern victorious revolutionary movement since 1789 without executions, guillotine or firing squads: even the thugs of the Guardia Nacional were only put in jail in order to be "re-educated."

Vatican and bishops react

The revolutionary Christians do not intend to establish a parallel Church, a "People's Church" separated and opposed to the existing one (led by Monsignor Obando). Although their conception of Church affairs emphasizes the pastoral role of the laity and sees the Church as a "historical community of believers" rather than an institution exclusively based on the hierarchical authority of the bishops, they want only to secure for themselves a "space" inside the one and only Church.

This however is not accepted by the local hierarchy or the Vatican. A majority of the bishops, led by Monsignor Obando, reject both the *proceso* and the Christians committed to it.

At first, the bishops seemed to accept the revolution. Their statement of November 17, 1979 was astonishingly progressive: it favoured a socialism that would lead to a "true transfer of power toward the popular classes," and that would aim at satisfying the needs of the majority of Nicaraguans through a nationally planned economy. Although it rejected "class hatred," it accepted class struggle as "the dynamic factor... leading to a just transformation of structures." It called for radical social change, beyond "the defense of individual interests, whether large or small." And finally, it proclaimed that "our faith in Jesus and in the God of life... should illuminate the commitment of Christians in the present revolutionary process!" (31)

However, after the liberal members of the coalition government (Alfonso Robelo and Violeta Chamorro) broke with the FSLN in April 1980, the bishops turned increasingly against the *proceso*. In May 1980 they called on the three priests to leave the government and, during the next few years, engaged in open confrontation with the Sandinistas and radical Catholics. During his visit in 1983 the Pope of course supported the bishops and denounced the "People's Church," ordering the Cardenal brothers and Miguel d'Escoto to give up their governmental responsibilities. When they refused to comply, they were suspended or expelled from their religious orders (in 1984). In 1985 Monsignor Obando, having just been appointed Cardinal by Rome, travelled to Miami and expressed solidarity with

31) Quoted in P. Berryman, *op.cit.*, p. 396.

the Contra leaders. Soon several priests were accused of counter-revolutionary activity by the Government and expelled from the country. However, after a period of mutual confrontation, there have been attempts, in the last two years, to reach a *modus vivendi* between the Church and the FSLN: in a very skilful move, the Sandinistas chose Monsignor Obando as mediator in their negotiations with the Contra rebels.



Sandinistas and religion

One of the reasons why the conservative bishops were so hostile to the FSLN was the fact that they perceived the fusion between Sandinismo and Christianity as a threat. The friendly overtures of the Sandinistas to religion were more frightening for certain bishops (in Managua and Rome) than the kind of atheistic doctrinaire hostility typical of East European regimes. As Conor Cruise O'Brien put it in a recent essay:

"With proper Marxists, churchmen knew where they stood: Marxists in one sphere, the Church in quite a different one - a tidy and tenable state of affairs. This new stuff was quite different... What was new in Nicaragua - and most alarmingly new - was that for the first time liberation theology had the backing of a State: a most undesirable precedent, for Latin America in particular." (32)

What was indeed the attitude of the Sandinista (non-believing) Marxists towards revolutionary Christians?

According to Father Giulio Girardi, the well-known Italian theologian (known for his interest in Marxism

32) Conor Cruise O'Brien, "God and Man in Nicaragua," *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1986, p. 57.

and his support of revolutionary Nicaragua), there are two attitudes among the Sandinista cadres:

- the old "orthodox" conception - inspired by the Soviet (or Cuban) handbooks of "Marxism-Leninism": Christians are allies, but not sure ones, because of their faith and their links to the Church. At best the convergence with them takes place in practice, but never in theory, where the contradiction (between "materialism" and "idealism") is total. This attitude is often found among recently trained medium-level cadres, without much pre-1979 experience.

- the new, "Nicaraguan" conception - inspired by the concrete experience of common struggle: revolutionary Christians belong to the vanguard. One has to reformulate the traditional Marxist theory of religion and recognize its subversive potential. The convergence with revolutionary Christians is both practical and theoretical, on the question of the liberation of the oppressed. This is the attitude of the main leaders of the FSLN - like Luis Carrion, who insisted in a speech in September 1979: this is not an "alliance" between Marxists and Christians; those who make the whole journey are *compañeros*, Sandinistas like the others. (33)

What does to be *con el proceso* mean for committed Christians? It means to support the extension and deepening of the revolution - in particular of land reform - and the defense of the gains of the revolution against the Contra rebels and U.S. intervention. But at the same time they want to keep their identity and an open, fraternally critical attitude towards the revolutionary leadership.

For instance, in a statement released in June 1985 (*Church and Revolution in Nicaragua*) the Centro Ecumenico Antonio Valdivieso wrote:

"We recognize the FSLN as the vanguard of the people... However they can make mistakes, and in these difficult years of transition they often made mistakes, even on very important issues like the Miskito problem, the land reform, censorship of the press, etc. They also made some mistakes, in our view, in relation to the Church: for instance the expulsion of ten priests... (But) we also see the honesty with which the leaders of the FSLN recognized and corrected some of these mistakes." (34)

In any case, there is no doubt that the Christian component of Sandinismo is one of the reasons for the originality of the Nicaraguan revolution and its force of attraction in the country itself, in Latin America and in the whole world.

33) G. Girardi, *Fe en la Revolucion, Revolucion en la Cultura*, Managua: Ed. Nueva Nicaragua, 1983, p. 69.

34) Centro Ecumenico Antonio Valdivieso, "Iglesia y Revolucion en Nicaragua," in G. Girardi, B. Forcano, J.M. Vigil (editores), *Nicaragua Trincheras Teologica*, C.E.A.V., Managua, 1987.

VI. Christianity and the origins of the revolutionary struggle in El Salvador

As in Nicaragua, it was only after the conference of Medellín that things began to change in the Salvadoran Church.

The first communities

Under the influence of the new orientation adopted in 1968 by the Latin American Bishops and of the first writings of Liberation Theology – those, for instance, of Jon Sobrino, a Basque Jesuit living in El Salvador – a group of priests started missionary work among the poor peasants of the diocese of Aguilares in 1972-1973. The central figure in this group was Father Rutilio Grande, a Salvadoran Jesuit who taught at the seminary of San Salvador, but decided to leave the city to share the life of the rural poor. The priests' missionary team (many of them Jesuits) lived among the peasants and initiated base communities conceived by them as:

"A community of brothers and sisters committed to building a new world, with neither oppressors nor oppressed, according to God's plan."

They read the Bible to the peasants and compared their lives to the Hebrews' who were slaves in Egypt under the Pharaoh, but liberated themselves through collective action. An average seven hundred people attended weekly CEB meetings and the circle of those influenced ranged from two to five thousand (35).

The traditional religious structures of the villages, the so-called societies of "Adorers of the Holy Sacrament," whose main activity was to say the rosary, were replaced by Delegates of the Word (like in Nicaragua, also on the initiative of the Jesuits), who read the Bible with the community. The missionaries broke the passivity and alienation of the traditional peasant religion, by explaining that instead of just "adoring" Jesus it was more important to follow his example and struggle against evil in the world, with the poor, against the powerful. They helped the peasants win back their human dignity, and this generated initiative, creativity and the rise of a new leadership elected by the community. And finally they insisted on the importance of fighting the social sin, identified with exploitation and capitalism.

Father Rutilio said in his last homily in 1977:

"Our ideal is like the Eucharist, a large common table with room for all. In this country to preach the Gospel is subversive. If Jesus came to us again, they would call him a rebel, a subversive, a Jewish foreigner, a propagandist of exotic and foreign ideas. They would crucify him."

One month later he was shot by the army.

The religious change brought a political conversion (charged with religious feelings). The "awakening through the Scriptures" led to militant action and "conscientization" (consciousness-raising) led to organization. As traditional religion became revolutionary religion, it led to revolutionary politics. Many radical Christians began to be attracted by the revolutionary guerilla movements, particularly the "Farabundo Marti" People's Liberation Forces (FPL) a leftist split from the Communist Party.

Towards trade unionism and politics

One of the Delegates of the Word educated by father Rutilio, Apolinario Serrano ("Polin"), became the president of a new Christian peasant union in 1974 (the Federación Cristiana de Campesinos del Salvador - FECCAS). Soon FECCAS converged with another peasant union (the Union de los Trabajadores del Campo - UTC), with the teachers union (the Asociación Nacional de Educadores del Salvador - ANDES) and with students' and pupils' movements to found a common organization, the Revolutionary People's Bloc (Bloque Popular Revolucionario - BPR), which was sympathetic to the guerilla movement. The main leader of the BPR was Juan Chacon, a young Christian activist and organizer of base communities.

The Church hierarchy was divided: while the archbishop, Monsignor Romero and the auxiliary bishop, Monsignor Rivera y Damas, denounced the military's repression of popular movements and killing of priests and lay activists, the other three bishops supported the Army – one of them, Monsignor Alvarez, even had the title of Colonel in the Armed Forces...

In September 1979 the army killed Apolinario Serrano and three other leaders of FECCAS; there was such a popular outrage that one month later the dictatorship of General Romero was ousted by the armed forces themselves. A coalition government was formed including moderate leftists like social-democrat Guillermo Ungo.

But the military kept real power in their own hands and blocked any reform, while continuing the massive killings of demonstrators and peasants. Two months later, December 1979, the progressive ministers withdrew from the coalition government and were replaced, a few months later, by the Christian Democrats of Napoleon Duarte. Soon after, in March 1980, Monsignor Romero was killed by a death-squad (under orders from Major D'Aubuisson) while celebrating mass. During

35) See Universidad Centro-Americana, *Rutilio Grande, mártir de la evangelización rural*, San Salvador, 1978.

36) Quoted in *El Salvador, un pueblo perseguido. Testimonio de Cristianos*, Lima: CEP, 1981, p. 55.

his funeral the army again shot at the people, killing 35.

In November 1980, leaders of the legal opposition, the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), who were meeting at the Jesuit School were all killed by the army; among them Juan Chacon, the leader of the BPR. And in December 1980 four North American women missionaries were raped and killed by the military: three nuns – Maura Clarke, Ita Ford (both of the Maryknoll Order), Dorothy Kazel – and one lay missionary, Jean Donovan.

The popular answer to all this killing began in January 1981, when the newly formed guerrilla coalition, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Marti de Liberación Nacional - FMLN) – bringing together five armed groups – launched a general offensive against the army. It was the beginning of a civil war which is still raging today: although they have received unlimited help from the U.S. in billions of dollars, modern weapons and military advisers, the armed forces have been unable to destroy the guerrillas, which are stronger today than they were eight years ago. The FMLN is the heir of two different traditions which converged during the 1970s: that of the rebel Christians and of the dissident Marxists. The mass base for the insurgency in the rural areas came from FECCAS, the Christian peasant union.

The conversion of Monsignor Romero

A few words about the bishop who symbolized the commitment of the Church to the poor and became, according to Jean Donovan, "the leader of Liberation Theology in practice": Monsignor Romero.

Born in 1917 in a humble family (his father was a telegraph operator) Oscar Romero became a priest in 1942 and studied theology in Rome (1943). In 1966, he became secretary of the Salvadoran Conference of Bishops. In 1970 he was appointed auxiliary Bishop of San Salvador and in 1977 Archbishop of the capital. As he would later recount to friends, he was chosen as the one most able to neutralize the "Marxist priests" and CEBs and improve relations between the Church and government, which had deteriorated under the former Bishop (Monsignor Chavez).

Monsignor Romero initially appeared as indeed a rather conservative bishop, both because of his past (he had sympathized with the Opus Dei in his youth) and because he believed in personal prayer and personal conversion rather than social change. He criticized the base communities for being too politicized and losing their Christian identity. He identified the glory of God with the glory of the Church and was very ecclesiastical, attached to the canons and discipline of the institution. He was considered by the radical priests as "purely spiritual" and a traditionalist.

His conversion (to the liberation of the poor) began with the murder of Father Rutilio Grande in March 1977. Deeply touched by the martyrdom of the Jesuit missionary, Monsignor Romero broke with the government of Colonel Molina and refused to take part in any official celebration as long as the murder had not

been investigated. After another priest was killed (Alfonso Navarro, May 1977) and the Aguilares parish house destroyed by the Army (after the arrest of four Jesuits and three hundred parish members), he became increasingly radical in his protest against violations of human rights by the military.

After 1978 Monsignor Romero was deeply influenced by the Liberation Theologian Jon Sobrino, who advised him in writing his Pastoral Letters. He entered a growing conflict with the conservative bishops, the papal Nuncio, the military, the oligarchy. He had regular meetings with radical priests and the base communities, and later with trade-unionists and militants of the BPR.

Condemns the junta

When the first government Junta was formed in October 1979 he had some hope (or illusions) that reforms would be made, but he sharply denounced the second Junta (the coalition between the Army and Christian Democracy):

"The present government has no popular support and rests only on the Armed Forces and some foreign powers. The presence of Christian Democracy hides, at the international level, the repressive character of the existing regime."

When the ex-Minister of Education in the First Junta, Salvador Samayoa, went underground and joined the guerrilla (the FPL), Monsignor Romero refused to condemn him and insisted that the reason for violence was the injustice of the established social structure. (37)

His Sunday homilies were attended by thousands in the Cathedral and hundreds of thousands through the Church's Radio station (ISAX). They linked the Bible and life of the Church with social and political events, from the standpoint of the poor. One of his leitmotifs was the following (homily from February 2, 1980):

"The hope which our Church encourages is not naive, nor is it passive – it is rather a summons for the great majority of the people, the poor, that they assume their proper responsibility, that they raise their consciousness, that – in a country where it is legally or practically prohibited – they set about organizing themselves... Liberation will arrive only when the poor are the controllers of, and protagonists in, their own struggle and liberation."

A few weeks later, in an interview to *Prensa Latina* (the Cuban news agency) he again insisted:

"I believe in the popular organizations... these organizations are the social forces which are going to promote and establish an authentic society... Organization is necessary to struggle efficiently, and is indispensable for the process of liberation." (38)

A few days later, Monsignor Romero published his

37) See *Porque asesinaron a Monseñor Romero?* Folletos Monográficos "Rutilio Grande," n° 5, Managua: Instituto Histórico Centro-Americano, n.d. p.16

38) Quoted in Ana Carrigan, *Salvador Witness. The Life and Calling of Jean Donovan*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1984, p. 109, and in Plácido Erdozain, Maurice Barth, *Salvador. Oscar Romero et son peuple*, Paris: Karthala, 1982, p. 152.

letter to President Carter, demanding that he not give military aid to the Salvadoran regime and that he not interfere in the determination of the destiny of the Salvadoran people – a document which had an immediate international impact. He knew very well that his life was in danger; in an interview to the Mexican daily *Excelsior* he said:

"I have often been threatened with death... If I am killed, I will resurrect in the Salvadoran people. (...) Martyrdom is a grace of God which I do not think that I deserve. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, let my blood be a seed of freedom and the sign that hope will soon become reality. One Bishop may die, but the Church of God, which is the people, will never perish." (39)

A call to disobedience

Finally, in his homily at the Metropolitan Cathedral on March 23, Monsignor Romero dared to take an unprecedented step: he called on the soldiers not to obey their superiors.

"I would like to make a special appeal to the members of the army... Brothers, each one of you is one of us. We are the same people. The peasants you kill are your own brothers and sisters. When you hear the voice of a man commanding you to kill, remember instead the voice of God "Thou Shalt not Kill!" God's law must prevail. No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. There is still time for you to obey your own conscience, even in the face of a sinful command to kill. (...) In the name of God, in the name of our tormented people whose cries rise up to Heaven I beseech you, I beg you, I command you,
STOP THE REPRESSION!"

The next day he was killed by the death-squads... (40)

Monsignor Romero became an exemplary hero and martyr in the eyes of radical Christians of the whole world. His spiritual and political itinerary shows that change at the grass-roots can have an impact among the heads of the Church, and that the commitment of bishops to the poor is not necessarily an opportunistic maneuver to win more influence for the institution, but can be an authentic conversion leading to the sacrifice of one's life.

39) Quoted in P. Erdozain, M. Barth, *op.cit.*, pp. 146-147.

40) Quoted in Ana Carrigan, *op.cit.*, p. 152. Post-Scriptum in December 1988: a few weeks ago, the Salvadoran Parliament – under ARENA (extreme right) hegemony – decided to dismiss the Chief Prosecutor, because he insisted on accusing Major D'Aubuisson (leader of the ARENA) for ordering the murder of Mgr. Romero.



VII. Liberation Theology and Marxism

We have seen how liberation theology developed and entered into conflict with Rome in the 1980s. Of all the sins that Rome attributes to the new theologians, there is one which is by far the most serious, dangerous and worrisome: the *sin of Marxism*. According to a representative of the conservative current, CELAM president, Monsignor Lopez Trujillo, "the indiscriminate use" of Marxist analysis "is upsetting and undermining the very structure of the Church." (41) There is no doubt that Marxism is one of the main bones of contention in the polemic over liberation theology. Why have Roman Catholic theologians have been attracted by this heretical doctrine?

The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

Let us turn the floor over to Cardinal Ratzinger, an eminent Vatican theologian whose political shrewdness cannot be doubted. His answer was this:

"[In the 1960s] a definite vacuum in meaningfulness came over the Western world... [In this situation,] various forms of neo-Marxism went through a transformation and took on a moral poignancy as well as a promise of significance which proved almost irresistible for university youth... [Furthermore,] the moral challenge of poverty and oppression could no longer be ignored at a time when Europe and North America had reached a previously unheard-of level of opulence. This challenge obviously required new answers that could not be found in the traditions which had existed until that time. This changed theological and philosophical situation directly stimulated a search for answers in a form of Christianity that would let itself be guided by Marxist philosophers' apparently scientifically grounded models of hope."

The result has been the emergence of liberation theologians who "have adopted the basic Marxist option." The seriousness of the danger presented by this new doctrine was underestimated:

"because it did not fit into any previously existing scheme of heresy; its starting point fell outside what could be grasped with the traditional models of debate."

One cannot deny, the Cardinal recognizes, that the new theology, combining Biblical criticism and Marxist analysis, is "seductive and endowed with a nearly flawless logic," that it seems to answer "both to scien-

tific requirements and contemporary moral challenges." But this only makes it more formidable:

"For an error is all the more dangerous that its kernel of truth is greater." (42)

We know what came next – a few months later the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly known as the Holy Office of the Inquisition) published a document signed by its Prefect, Cardinal Ratzinger himself, which, for the first time officially condemned liberation theology as a "deviation." The main criticism levelled by this *Instruction on Some Aspects of "Liberation Theology"* against the new Latin American theologians was their use "in an insufficiently critical way" of concepts "borrowed from various currents of Marxist thought." As a result of these concepts – particularly that of the class struggle – the Church of the Poor of the Christian tradition became in liberation theology:

"a class-based Church, which has become conscious of the needs of the revolutionary struggle as a stage towards liberation, and celebrates this liberation in its liturgy – which necessarily leads to calling into question the Church's *sacramental and hierarchical structure...*" (43)

These formulations are patently polemical; nevertheless, it is undeniable that liberation theologians have drawn analyses, concepts and viewpoints from the Marxist theoretical arsenal which play an important role in their understanding of social reality in Latin America. By virtue of a few positive references to certain aspects of Marxism – independent of the content of these references – liberation theology has caused an immense upheaval in the political-cultural field; it has broken a taboo and encouraged a great number of Christians to take a fresh look not just at the theory but also at the practice of Marxists. Even when its approach was critical, it had nothing to do with the traditional anathemas against "atheistic Marxism, the diabolical enemy of Christian civilization" – phrases still current in the speeches of military dictators from Videla to Pinochet.

Break-up of Stalinist monolith

We mentioned earlier the historical (economic, social and political) conditions that have permitted this opening of Catholic culture to Marxist ideas. We should merely add here that Marxism too evolved in that period. There was the break-up of Stalinist monolithism in the wake of the Twentieth Congress of the

41) A. Lopez Trujillo, "Les problèmes de l'Amérique Latine," *Théologies de la Libération*, Paris: Cerf, 1985, p. 113.

42) Cardinal Ratzinger, "Les conséquences fondamentales d'une option marxiste" (1984), *Théologies de la Libération*, pp. 122-130.

43) "Instruction sur quelques aspects de la "théologie de la libération," 1984, *Théologies de la Libération*, pp. 156, 171-174. This document was followed by a more conciliatory and "positive" text in 1985: *Instruction on Christian Liberty and Liberation*.

Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Sino-Soviet split. In Latin America you also had the role of the Cuban revolution and the end of the Communist Parties' hegemony. Marxism ceased to be a closed and rigid system, submitted to the ideological authority of Moscow and became once again a thought in motion, open to various interpretations and therefore accessible to a new Christian interpretation. (44)

It is difficult to present an overall view of liberation theology's attitude and positions on Marxism because, on the one hand, there is a very wide range of attitudes – ranging from the cautious use of some elements to an integral synthesis – and, on the other hand, a certain change has taken place between the positions expressed in the more radical period of 1968 to 1980 and today's more reserved stance (following Rome's criticisms). But, on the basis of the writings of the most representative liberation theologians (like Gutierrez and Boff) and of certain episcopal documents, one can identify certain common key reference points.

Gustavo Gutierrez

Certain Latin America theologians (influenced by Althusser) refer to Marxism simply as one (or the) *social science*, to be used in a strictly instrumental way to improve our knowledge of Latin American reality. This is at one and the same time too wide and too narrow a definition. Too wide because Marxism is not the only social science... Too narrow because Marxism is not only a science but is founded on a **practical choice**. It aims not just to know the world but to **change it**.

In reality, the interest – what many writers call the "fascination" – of liberation theologians for Marxism is greater and more profound than the mere borrowing of a few analytical concepts for purposes of discovery would suggest.

It also involves **values** (its communal values), **ethical/political choices** (its solidarity with the poor) and **future utopias** (its promise of a society without classes or oppression). Gustavo Gutierrez thinks Marxism does not only provide a scientific analysis but also a utopian aspiration of social change. He criticizes the scientific vision of Althusser, which:

"prevents us seeing the profound unity of Marx's work and consequently of easily understanding its capacity to inspire a radical and permanent revolutionary praxis." (45)

44) On this, see Guy Petitdemange's excellent study, "Théologie(s) de la libération et marxisme(s)," in "Pourquoi la théologie de la libération?" *Cahiers de l'actualité religieuse et sociale*, 1985, supplément n° 307. For a historical overview of the process see also the interesting essay by Enrique Dussel, "Encuentros de cristianos y marxistas en América Latina," *Cristianismo y Sociedad*, Santo Domingo, n° 74, 1982.

45) Gustavo Gutierrez, *Théologie de la libération - Perspectives*, Bruxelles, Lumen Vitae, 1974, p. 244. It is true that since 1984, following the Vatican criticisms, Gutierrez seems to have retreated towards a less exposed position reducing the convergence with Marxism to an encounter between theology and the social sciences. See G. Gutierrez, "Théologie et sciences sociales," 1984, in *Théologies de la Libération*, pp. 189-193.

Which sort of Marxism inspires the liberation theologians? Certainly not that of the Soviet *diamat* (dialectical materialism) textbooks, nor that of the Latin American Communist Parties. Rather they are attracted to "Western Marxism" – occasionally dubbed "neo-Marxism" in their documents. In *Liberation Theology - Perspectives*, Gustavo Gutierrez's great inaugural work (1971), the most quoted Marxist writer is Ernst Bloch. There are also references to Althusser, Marcuse, Lukacs, Gramsci, Henri Lefebvre, Lucien Goldmann and ... Ernest Mandel (counterposed to Althusser for his better understanding of Marx's concept of alienation).

But these European references are less important than the Latin American ones: Mariategui, as a source of original Marxism, adapted to the reality of the continent, the Cuban revolution, as an event galvanizing the history of Latin America, and finally the theory of dependence: the criticism of dependent capitalism put forward by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, André Gunder Frank, Theotonio dos Santos, Anibal Quijano (all mentioned several times in Gutierrez's book). It goes without saying that Gutierrez and his co-thinkers prioritize certain Marxist themes (humanism, alienation, praxis, utopia) and reject others ("materialist ideology," atheism).

The reality of poverty

The starting point for this discovery of Marxism is an unavoidable fact, a brutal mass reality in Latin America: *poverty* (see Chapter III). For the liberation theologians, Marxism appears to be the most systematic, coherent and global explanation of the causes of this poverty and as the only sufficiently radical proposition for abolishing it.

Concern for the poor has been a tradition of the Church for almost two millennia, going back to the evangelical sources of Christianity. Latin American theologians place themselves in the continuity of this tradition which provides them with both references and inspiration. But they break sharply with the past on a key point: for them poor people are no longer essentially **objects of charity** but **subjects of their own liberation**. Paternalistic aid or assistance is replaced by solidarity with the poor's struggle for self-emancipation. Here is where the link is made with a fundamental Marxist political principle – **the emancipation of the workers will be the work of the workers themselves**. This change is perhaps the liberation theologians' most important new political contribution. It also has the greatest consequences in relation to the Church's social doctrine.

The Vatican accuses Gutierrez and his allies of having replaced the poor of the Christian tradition with the proletariat of Marxism. This criticism is not exactly true. For Latin American theologians the poor is a concept having moral, Biblical and religious connotations. God her/himself is defined by them as the "God of the Poor" and Christ is reincarnated in today's crucified poor. It is also a socially broader concept than that of the working class: it includes, according to Gutierrez,

both the exploited classes and the despised races and marginalized cultures (in his most recent writings he adds women who are doubly exploited).

Some Marxists will no doubt criticize this replacement of the "materialist" concept of a proletariat by such a vague, emotional and imprecise category. **In reality, this term corresponds to the Latin American situation, where one finds, both in the towns and countryside, an enormous mass of poor people – unemployed, semi-employed, seasonal workers, street vendors, marginal people, prostitutes etc – who are excluded from the "formal" productive system.** The Christian/Marxist trade union activists of El Salvador have invented a term which covers all these components of the oppressed and exploited population: the "paupertariat" (*pobresiado*).

The struggle of the poor

The preferential option for the poor, adopted by the Puebla Latin American Bishops' Conference (1979) was in practice a compromise formula, interpreted in a traditional (social assistance) sense by the Church's more moderate and conservative currents, and interpreted more radically by the liberation theologians and the more advanced clerical currents – as a commitment to the organization and struggle of poor people for their own liberation. In other words, the Marxist **class struggle**, not only as "an instrument of analysis" but as a **guide for action**, became an essential feature of the new Church of the Poor. As Gustavo Gutierrez states:

"To deny the reality of the class struggle means in practice taking a position in favour of the dominant social sectors. Neutrality on this question is impossible. [What is needed is] to eliminate the appropriation by some of the surplus value produced by the work of the great majority, and not lyrical appeals in favour of social harmony. We need to build a socialist society which is more just, more free and more humane and not a society of false conciliation and apparent equality."

This leads him to the following **practical conclusion**:

"Building a just society today means necessarily being consciously and actively involved in the class struggle taking place in front of us." (46)

How can this be squared with the Christian obligation of universal love? Gutierrez's answer is distinguished by its great political rigor and moral generosity: we do not hate our oppressors, we want to liberate them too by freeing them from their own alienation, their ambition, their egoism, in a word from their inhuman condition. But to do that we have to resolutely choose the side of the oppressed and concretely and effectively fight the oppressor class.

46) Gustavo Gutierrez, *Théologie de la Libération - Perspectives*, pp. 276-277.

47) For an impressive list of Christians who have given their life for the cause of social emancipation, see the book published by the Jesuits of the Instituto Histórico Centroamericano de Managua, *La Sangre por el Pueblo. Nuevos Mártires de América Latina*, IHCA, Managua, 1983.

An authentic commitment

For liberation Christianity choosing the side of the poor is not a mere literary phrase: it is expressed in **practice** by the commitment of hundreds of thousands of Christians – members of base communities, lay people involved in pastoral work, priests and members of religious orders. It is seen in the setting up of neighborhood committees in shantytowns, of class struggle opposition currents in the trade unions, in the organization of landless peasant movements and the defence of political prisoners against torture.

If this is seen, as some short-sighted Marxists do, as just a "trick" by the Church, a "populist maneuver" to keep its control over the masses or a skilful tactic to keep communism at bay, then the essential reality is ignored and nothing is understood either of the subjective motivations or the objective significance of the phenomenon. It is not a "trick" but a deep-going spiritual turn, an authentic moral and political **conversion** to the cause of the poor which led the priests Domingo Lain (killed in 1974) and Gaspar Garcia Laviana (killed in 1978) – both of Spanish origin – to join the guerrilla fighters in Colombia and Nicaragua. It inspired the Brazilian Jesuit, João Bosco Penido Burnier (killed in 1976) and the Salvadoran Jesuit, Rutilio Grande (killed in 1977) to work in solidarity with the peasants and help their organization. Such a conversion led Monsignor Oscar Romero (killed in 1980), although he had already received death-threats from the army, to call on soldiers to refuse to obey their officers when told to fire on the people. (47)

To fight effectively against poverty we must understand its causes. This is where liberation theology converges again with Marxism. The poverty of the great majority and the obscene wealth of the privileged few have the same economic foundation – the **capitalist system**. More precisely in Latin America we are talking of **dependent capitalism** subordinate to the multinational monopolies of the big imperialist centers.

The moral criticism of capitalism's injustices and hostility to its cold and impersonal nature are an old tradition of the Church. Max Weber, the sociologist of religions, has already drawn attention to the fundamental opposition between Catholicism's ethical rationalism and capitalism's economic rationalism. Of course this did not prevent the Church from becoming reconciled with bourgeois order from the nineteenth century on, but the criticism of "liberal capitalism" remains a component of Catholic culture.

Uncovering the causes of poverty

In the 1960s this tradition started to be articulated with the Marxist analysis of capitalism (which also includes a moral condemnation of injustice) specifically in the form of **dependency theory**. The great merit of dependency theorists (notably Andre Gunder Frank and Anibal Quijano) was to break with the "developmentist" illusions that prevailed among Latin American Marxists in the 1950s (particularly the Communist Parties' ideology), by showing that the cause of mis-

ery, of underdevelopment, of growing inequality and military dictatorships was not "feudalism" or insufficient modernization, but the very structure of dependent capitalism. Consequently they argued that some form of socialist transformation could wrest Latin American nations from dependency and poverty. Certain aspects of this analysis were to be taken up not only by the liberation theologians but also by bishops and episcopal conferences, particularly in Brazil.

In May 1980, a group of experts from the U.S. Republican Party prepared a document which was to become a basic political "primer" for the party's presidential candidate, Ronald Reagan – the Santa Fe document. In the second part of the document, entitled "Internal Subversion", proposition number 3 states:

"United States' foreign policy must begin to confront (and not only react after the fact to) liberation theology. In Latin America the Church's role is vital for the concept of political liberty. Unfortunately Marxist-Leninist forces have used the Church as a political weapon against private property and the capitalist system of production, infiltrating the religious community with ideas that are more communist than Christian."

On the other hand, if by "communist ideas" the Republican Party experts mean those of the Communist Parties, then their analysis completely misses what is really happening. The Church of the Poor, inspired in the first place by religious and ethical considerations, displays a much more radical, intransigent and categorical anti-capitalism – since it includes the dimension of moral revulsion – than the continent's Communist Parties, who still believe in the progressive virtues of the industrial bourgeoisie and the historical "anti-feudal" role of industrial (capitalist) development. One example will suffice to illustrate this paradox. The Brazilian Communist Party explained in its Sixth Congress resolutions (1967) that:

"The socialization of the means of production does not correspond to the present level of the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production."

In other words, industrial capitalism must first develop the economy and modernize the country. However in 1973, the bishops and superiors of religious orders of the Center-West region of Brazil published a document (*The Cry of the Churches*) with the following conclusion:

"We must overcome capitalism: it is the greatest evil, an accumulated sin, the rotten roots, the tree which produces all the fruit we know so well – poverty, hunger, illness and death.... In order to do this it is necessary to go beyond private property of the means of production (factories, land, commerce and banks)...." (48)

48) *Documentos do Partido Comunista Brasileiro*, Lisboa: Ed. Avante, 1976, p. 71. *Los Obispos Latinoamericanos entre Medellín y Puebla*, San Salvador: Universidad Centroamericana, 1978, p. 71.

49) *J'ai entendu les cris de mon peuple (Exode 3.7)*, document

Capitalism as structural sin

Another episcopal document is even more explicit. The *Declaration of the Bishops of the North East of Brazil* (1973) states:

"The injustice produced by this society is the fruit of capitalist relations of production which necessarily create a class society characterized by discrimination and injustice.... The oppressed class has no other option for its liberation than to follow the long and difficult road (the journey has already begun) leading to the social ownership of the means of production. This is the principal foundation of the gigantic historical project of the global transformation of present society into a new society in which it become possible to create the objective conditions allowing the oppressed to recover the humanity they have been stripped of... The Gospel calls all Christians and all men of good will to join this prophetic current..." (49)

The document was signed by thirteen bishops (including Dom Helder Camara) and by the provincial superiors of the Franciscans, Jesuits, Redemptionists and by the Abbot of St. Benedict monastery in Bahia....

As we can see from these extracts – and from a lot more that have come out of the Christian liberation current – solidarity with the poor leads to a condemnation of capitalism and then to a desire for socialism. What sort of socialism? There is a more or less generalized and explicit criticism of "presently existing" models of socialism among revolutionary Christians and liberation theologians. As for Gutierrez, he insists that the oppressed people of Latin America must leave the previously adopted paths to socialism and **creatively seek their own road to socialism**. His approach is inspired by Mariategui's writings for whom socialism in Latin America cannot be a "pure imitation" or "copy" of other experiences but a "heroic creation":

"We must give birth, through our own reality, our own language, to an Indo-American socialism." (50)

It goes without saying that, for the liberation theologians, socialism, or any form of human emancipation is only a preparation or **anticipation of total salvation**, of the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Which Marxism?

We should not deduce from all this that the liberation theologians purely and simply support Marxism. As Leonardo and Clodovis Boff emphasize in the answer to Cardinal Ratzinger, Marxism is used as a **mediation** for the propagation of the faith:

"... It has helped clarify and enrich certain major theological notions: people, poor, history and even

d'évêques et supérieurs religieux du Nord-Est brésilien, Bruxelles: Entraide et Fraternité, 1973, pp. 42-43.

50) Gustavo Gutierrez, *Théologie de la Libération - Perspectives*, pp. 102, 320. The quote from Mariategui is taken from *Ideologia e política*, p. 249.

praxis and politics. That does not mean to say that we have reduced the theological content of these notions to the limits of the Marxist form. On the contrary, we have used the valid theoretical content (which conforms to the truth) of Marxist notions within the theological horizon." (51)

Among those aspects of Marxism they reject are, as one might expect, **materialist philosophy, atheist ideology and the characterization of religion as the "opium of the people."** However, they do not reject Marxist criticism of the Church and "presently existing" religious practices. As Gustavo Gutierrez has said, the Latin American Church has contributed to giving a sacred character to the established order:

"The protection it receives from the social class that benefits from and defends the capitalist society that prevails in Latin America, has made the institutionalized Church a part of the system, and the Christian message a component of ruling ideology." (52)

This severe judgement is shared by a sector of the Latin American bishops. For example, in a declaration adopted by their Thirty-sixth Episcopal Assembly (1969), the Peruvian bishops stated:

"Above all we Christians should recognize that through lack of faith we have contributed in our words and actions, by our silence and omissions, to the present situation of injustice." (53)

One of the most interesting documents on this question is a resolution adopted by the CELAM Department of Education towards the end of the 1960s:

"The Christian religion has been used and is still used as an ideology justifying the rule of the powerful. Christianity in Latin America has been a functional religion for the system. Its rites, its churches and its work have contributed to channelling the people's dissatisfaction towards the hereafter, totally disconnected from the present world. Thus Christianity has held back the people's protest against an unjust and oppressive system." (54)

Of course this criticism is made in the name of an authentic evangelical Christianity, in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, and has nothing in common with a materialist questioning of religion as such.

"The Roman and feudal model of authority"

Undoubtedly among all the liberation theologians Leonardo Boff has formulated the most systematic and radical criticism of the **authoritarian structures** of the Catholic Church, from Emperor Constantine to today. In his opinion, these structures reflect a Roman

51) Leonardo et Clodovis Boff, "Le cri de la pauvreté," 1984, *Théologies de la libération*, p. 139.

52) G. Gutierrez, *op.cit.*, p. 266.

53) G. Gutierrez, *op.cit.*, pp. 117-18. In a footnote, Gutierrez mentions several other Latin American episcopal documents of similar persuasion.

and feudal model of authority: pyramidal hierarchy, sanctification of obedience, refusal of any internal criticism. Boff's "irreverence" goes so far as to compare (quoting the writings of a left-wing Brazilian Christian, Marcio Moreira Alves) the institutional and bureaucratic structure of the Church with that of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union:

"The parallels in their structures and practices reveal the logic of any centralizing power."

This type of analysis certainly did not please the Vatican, because following the publication of his book Boff was condemned by the Roman ecclesiastical authorities to one year of silence... Having said this, we should note that Boff does not reject the Church as such. He demands its total transformation, its reconstruction from the periphery to the center, by the poor, by those who live in the **"cellars of humanity."** (55)

As these extracts from the theologians' writings and from pronouncements of episcopal conferences show, a significant but minority sector of the Latin American Church has integrated certain basic Marxist ideas into its new understanding of Christianity. Some Christian trade unionists, Christians who are members of left-wing organizations or certain more radicalized movements like Christians for Socialism have a more direct approach of accepting a **synthesis or fusion** between Christianity and Marxism. Here we are talking about a Christian current inside the revolutionary movement. Indeed in many countries it is one of the main components of the revolutionary movement.

Questions

While liberation theologians have learned a lot from Marxism, do Marxists have anything to learn from them? Certain interesting questions can be posed, both from the theoretical and practical point of view. For example:

❶ Should one still consider – along with most "textbooks on Marxism-Leninism" – that the opposition between "materialism" and "idealism" is the fundamental question of philosophy? Is it still possible to contend, as does the *Concise Philosophical Dictionary* published by famed Soviet academicians P. Ioudine and M. Rosenthal, that dialectical materialism was superior to metaphysical materialism which was undeveloped, dead, crude and "idiotic"? (56) Isn't it true that the revolutionary idealism of the liberation theologians is superior to the idiotic materialism of the bourgeois economists and even of certain Stalinist "Marxists"? Particularly since this theological idealism has been shown to be perfectly compatible with a historical

54) *Juventud y cristianismo en America Latina*, quoted by G. Gutierrez, *op.cit.*, p. 266.

55) Leonardo Boff, *Igreja, Carisma e Poder*, pp. 70-72, 91-93.

56) P. Ioudine and M. Rosenthal, *Petit Dictionnaire Philosophique*, Moscou: Editions en Langues Etrangères, 1955, pp. 256, 360.

materialist approach to social reality...

② Why couldn't liberation theology help us combat the reductionist, economic and vulgar materialist tendencies that exist within the Marxist tradition? We have to take into consideration the role of moral and "spiritual" motivation if we want to understand why a whole layer of middle class intellectuals and individuals (the radicalized clergy) broke with their class and now support the cause of the oppressed. In the same way, to explain why the Christian masses shrug off their apathy and rise up against their oppressors we have to examine not just their objective social conditions, but also their subjectivity, culture, beliefs and their new way of experiencing their religion. Linking up again with the intuitions of Latin American Marxists like Jose Carlos Mariategui, the liberation theologians also help us to re-evaluate certain precapitalist communal traditions, kept alive in popular tradition (particularly among the peasants) and to distrust the blinkered culture of "economic progress," capitalist modernization and the "development of the productive forces" as such. Revolutionary Christians have been more aware of the social consequences of the "development of underdevelopment" under the multinationals' domination than many Marxists enmeshed in the chains of a purely economic "developmentist" logic.

③ In their revolt against the Church's authoritarianism, the Christians for liberation are wary of political authoritarianism in the trade unions and political parties. Their "basism" or "rank-and-fileism" occasionally takes on naive and excessive forms but is an understandable reaction against the anti-democratic, corrupt or manipulative practices of the populist or Stalinist apparatuses. Correctly formulated, isn't this anti-authoritarian sensitivity and this aspiration to democracy at the base a vital contribution to the self-organization of the oppressed and to an anti-bureaucratic recomposition of the workers movement?

④ Liberation theologians push us to reflect on the moral dimension of revolutionary commitment, of the struggle against social injustice and of the building of a new society. The Jesuits were deemed in the eyes of their enemies to support the amoral maxim "The end justifies the means." Trotsky in *Their Morals and Ours* defends them from this accusation and notes that such a doctrine, taken in the strict sense of the term would be "internally contradictory and psychologically absurd." (57) In any case the new revolutionary Jesuits, like Fernando Cardenal, a member of the Sandinista government, have little in common with this type of Machiavellism: their political commitment is inseparable from certain ethical values. It is to a large extent due to the

57) L. Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours*, New York: Merit, 1966, p. 16.

role of the Sandinista Christians that the Nicaraguan revolution is the first authentic social revolution, since 1789, to have abolished the death penalty. An example to be followed!

⑤ Finally liberation theology forces Marxists to re-examine their traditional thinking about religion; while it has played and continues to play in many places the role of the "opium of the people," can it not also act as the **toxin of the people**, as a call for the oppressed to awaken from their slumber, their passivity, their fatalism and become aware of their rights, their strength and their future?

What then are the criticism we can raise with the liberation theologians? The most urgent discussion to have with the Christians for liberation are not debates on materialism, religious alienation or on the history of the Church (and even less on the existence of God), but on the eminently practical and burning questions of the day: for example, divorce, abortion, contraception, the right of woman to control their bodies. In fact it is a debate which concerns the whole Latin American workers movement, which is far from having a coherent line on this issue.

It is a fact that on questions like the family and sexuality, abortion and birth control, even as progressive a Church as the Brazilian still defends traditionalist and backward positions – quite close to those preached by the pope. Only the most advanced liberation theologians like Frei Betto accept that abortion should be decriminalized. Need we emphasize that this is a matter of life or death for millions of Latin American women who are still compelled to have illegal abortions with tragic consequences: thousands of deaths that could have been avoided if the pregnancies had been terminated in a proper clinic.

Nevertheless some liberation theologians have begun to reflect on the question of the specific oppression of women. Their current thinking is reflected in the collection of interviews (with Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, Frei Betto, Pablo Richard, Hugo Assmann and others) about this issue published by Elsa Tamez in 1986. (58) More importantly, Christian women themselves are beginning to speak out, and the female voices of women theologians, religious and lay activists – such as Elsa Tamez, Yvone Gebara, Maria Jose Rosario Nunes, Maria Clara Bingemer – are being heard posing the question of the double oppression of Latin American women, and the multiple forms of discrimination they suffer in society as a whole and in the Church itself.

58) Elsa Tamez, *Teologos de la liberacion hablan sobre la mujer*, Costa Rica: DEI, 1986. Concerning the more general aspect of women's movements in Latin America, see Heather Dashner-Monk de Peralta, "Feminism to the tune of the cumbia, corrida, tango, cueca, samba..." *International Marxist Review*, Vol. 2, n°4, winter 1987.

VIII. Provisional Conclusions

The problem of a tactical alliance with the so-called Left Christian forces has been part of the concerns of the workers movement and Marxists in Latin America (and elsewhere) for a long time. During his trip to Chile in 1971, Fidel Castro mentioned the possibility of passing from a tactical to a **strategic** alliance between Marxists and Christians. But today, after the experiences of Brazil, Nicaragua and El Salvador, we should no longer be speaking in terms of an alliance but rather of **organic unity**. For the Christians are **already** one of the essential components of the revolutionary movement – and even of its Marxist vanguard – in many countries of Latin America.

We could spend a long time arguing over the philosophical enigma – or the theoretical challenge – of whether Marxist Christianity has any meaning from the point of view of dialectical materialism. What matters though, is what is happening in reality. And the fact is that Christian Marxists exist: they are an undeniable social and political fact. Not only do they exist, but they have often contributed to the revolutionary vanguard a moral sensitivity, experience with grass-roots work among the people and a utopian quest which can only enrich its outlook.

The possibility that Christian forces of a mass character will follow this path depends also on the attitude of Marxist non-believers: whether they are sectarian or open, suspicious or willing to listen. Here too the Sandinistas have given us a good example. In an interview he gave in August 1985, Comandante Luis Carrion, a member of the National Leadership of the FSLN, commented:

"I see no obstacle which should stop Christians, without renouncing their faith, from making their own all the Marxist conceptual tools which are required for a scientific understanding of the social processes and a revolutionary orientation in political practice. In other words, a Christian can be at once a Christian and a perfectly consistent Marxist... In this sense, our experience can teach many lessons. Many Christians have been and are active in the Sandinista Front and some of them are even priests. And I am not speaking here only of

rank-and-file militants: some of them are members of the Sandinista Assembly and hold high political responsibilities.... I think that certain Marxist vanguards have had a tendency to perceive progressive and revolutionary Christian sectors as an opponent force competing for a fraction of the political following of these parties. I think this is a mistake. Avoiding that mistake is one of the great achievements of the FSLN. We have linked up with the grass-roots structures of the Church, not to pull people out of them, but to integrate them to the Sandinista Front as a stage in its political development, without this meaning in any way that we opposed their participation in Christian institutions. On the contrary, we leave people in these structures so that their higher commitment will be transformed into political action in this environment. We never told them that in joining the FSLN, they had to face the dilemma of the Christian faith or their activity in the Front. If we had posed things in that way, we would have remained a tiny group of activists." (59)

It is difficult to foretell the outcome of the conflict between the Vatican and liberation theology, between the conservative Church and the Church of the Poor. It is not excluded that Rome may succeed in reasserting a certain control, particularly in countries like Brazil where the Church has escaped the long reach of the Curia. But it is quite unlikely that the millions of members of base Christian communities, the thousands of priests, male and female religious, theologians, pastoral agents and lay activists inspired by liberation theology will renounce their commitment and abandon the fight for the emancipation of the poor, the exploited and oppressed. In any case, one conclusion seems most likely: in many countries of Latin America the revolution will either be made with the participation of the Christians or will not be made at all.

59) "Les chrétiens dans la révolution sandiniste," *Inprecor*, n° 246, 6 juillet 1987, p.16.



Appendix : Christianity and Marxism, by Frei Betto *

Concepts summon varied images. Evoking the relationship between socialism and Christianity can conjure in the minds of some two opposite views of the world: the one, materialist, collectivist and synonymous of atheistic; the other spiritualist, personalist, with the Church occupying an important place in social relations. Underlying these images, there is surely one great mistake – the identification of a social regime with the liberating message announced by Jesus. Although the Gospel does contain certain principles which can inspire a political project for a common life in society, these cannot be exhausted or enclosed in the boundaries of a particular social regime, which, by virtue of its historical nature, must be transitory and imperfect. Still less should one consider the capitalist system, in which collective labor is subordinate to individual profit obtained through exploitation, as Christian. It is a fact that in capitalist regimes, the Church has enjoyed a freedom which seems to contrast with its situation in socialist regimes. But at what price? At the price of Christianity being manipulated by the state ideological apparatus of the ruling classes, in line with the following perverse interpretation of the message of Jesus so cynically expressed by Napoleon I:

“As far as I am concerned, I do not see in religion the mystery of incarnation, but the mystery of the social order: it refers the idea of equality back to the heavens, thereby preventing the rich from being massacred by the poor. Religion is a sort of vaccine which, by satisfying our love of the marvelous, protects us from charlatans and witch doctors; priests are more valuable than Kant and all the dreamers of Germany. How could order exist in a state without religion? Society cannot exist without inequality of fortunes and inequality of fortunes cannot exist without religion. When a man is dying of hunger alongside another one living in lavishness, he cannot accept this difference unless there is an authority to tell him: ‘God willed it thus, there must be poor and rich in the world, but later and forever after, things shall be shared!’”

In the minds of others, the concept of socialism is broad enough to include northern countries like Sweden and even socialist governments like Mitterrand's in France and Felipe Gonzalez's in Spain. This view is just as wrong as Napoleon's ideas about Christianity. The northern countries can afford the luxury of distributing greater social benefits to their people thanks to the plunder they carry out in the Third World, through their multinationals and banks. The poor pay the bill for the rich. The fact that so-called socialist parties are in power in a few capitalist regimes does not change the nature of these regimes – in which private owner-

ship of the means of production, class antagonism and a state apparatus under the hegemony of bourgeois interests still prevail.

When we speak of Christianity, we must – before considering its historical manifestations – start from its Biblical foundations. Likewise, by socialism we understand a regime in which social ownership of the means of production prevail, class antagonisms are abolished and the state is the expression of the interests of the great majority of workers.

1. The Biblical foundations of Christianity and its historical concretization

Christianity comes from the liberating practice of Jesus of Nazareth and his apostles' community in first century Palestine. In this region under the political, economic and military sway of the Roman Empire, Jesus took up the cause of the poor, announced the God of Life and denounced the Pharisees' and Sadduceans' oppressive religion which legitimated injustice; he demystified the kingdom of Caesar by promising the Kingdom of God which would abolish all inequality and social contradictions; he entered into conflict with the Judeo-Roman government, was persecuted, imprisoned, tortured and assassinated on the cross. His disciples were witness to his resurrection and recognized in him the Son of God present in human history....

Following Jesus's practice, what characterized the first Christian communities was precisely the socialization of goods:

“All the believers remained together and united, and shared among themselves what they had. They sold their properties and other things and shared the money with all, according to the needs of each” (*Acts of the Apostles*, 2, 44-45).

In an ideologically theocratic, socially pyramidal society in which the state and ruling classes' revenue derived from the extortion of tribute and the exploitation of land, creating socialistic clusters among the people in the name of a political prisoner assassinated as a subversive, was a strong provocation against the established order. That is why Friedrich Engels stated in his introduction to his study of primitive Christianity:

“The history of primitive Christianity presents notable resemblances with the modern movement of the working class.” (...)

As for its concrete manifestations of Christianity [since then], it is undeniable that, institutionalized as the Catholic Church, it has been mainly on the side of the rulers since it was coopted as a state religion by Constantine in the fourth century. Save certain honorable exceptions like the Fathers of the Church who clamored against injustice, the medieval movements considered heretical which revived these aspirations, and the exemplary figure of St Francis of Assisi, the

Church has a history of absolute centralization of power, of Crusades which legitimated plunder and conquest in the name of religion, of inquisitorial trials without the slightest respect for human rights, of suspicion towards reason, science and the beauty of the human body, of sanctification of the monarchy, ideological support of bourgeois rule, complicit silence under Nazism and Fascism, and anti-Semitic prejudice. The long list of the Church's sins should not hide its important role in preserving and defending the cultural inheritance of humanity, its validation of women through the cult of Mary, its attention to orphans, the sick and the aged in establishing the first hospitals, its extension of school education to the poor, its intransigent struggle for freedom of conscience, its encouragement of the arts and, recently, its preferential option for the oppressed in Third World countries, its prophetic denunciation of crimes against the people, its defense of political prisoners and the organization of the people in base communities of the Church. The theologian Hans Küng is right to note that:

“The history of the Church is probably a human history: a rich history, yet so poor, broad yet so narrow, immense yet so petty!”

2. Relations between Marxists and Christians

Marxism is above all a theory of revolutionary praxis. Nevertheless, some Marxists have tried to turn it into a sort of religion with its dogmas, based on a fundamentalist reading that transforms Marx's, Engels's and Lenin's works into a new Bible. But Marxism, like every other theory, is not amenable to one interpretation only. Epistemology teaches us that a text is always read in the context of a particular reader. These “lenses” of reality determine the interpretation of the theory. So Marx's work can be read through the lenses of Kautsky's positivistic materialism, M. Adler's neo-Kantianism, Gramsci's voluntaristic or Lukacs's objectivistic Hegelianism, Sartre's existentialism or Althusser's structuralism as well as in the light of Mao Zedong's peasant struggle, of the Cuban guerrilla, of Jose Carlos Mariategui's Peruvian reality or of the Sandinista people's insurrection. What matters is whether one is using Marxist theory as a tool for the liberation of oppressed people and not as totem or talisman. A fruit of the proletarian struggle, Marxism should always be judged on the basis of that struggle because that is the only way that it will not lose its revolutionary vigor and become an academic abstraction.

In this sense, Marxism and the Marxists cannot ignore the new role of Christianity as a ferment of liberation of the oppressed masses in Latin America. But to grasp this revolutionary potential of Christianity, Marxism will have to break with the straightjacket of its objectivist outlook and recognize the role of human subjectivity in history. This implies overcoming its economic tendency and, in the socialist regimes, a certain “metaphysics of the state,” and admitting to the relative autonomy of the superstructures. Revolutionary practice bursts through the boundaries of these

concepts and cannot be accounted for solely by strictly scientific analyses, because it necessarily includes ethical, mystical and utopian dimensions. The advances achieved by the socialist countries and the ideology embodied by the Party cannot subsume all aspect of interpersonal relations and their social and political consequences.

In any case, why should there be a contradiction between the determinant role of human subjectivity and historical materialism? As the determinant “in the last analysis,” the economic sphere is itself the result of the complex formed by the productive forces and relations of production. It is these relations of production that determine the nature of the productive forces. To speak of the relations of production is to admit that “in the first analysis” one finds also class relations, the revolutionary activity of the ruled classes whose consciousness and practice are determinant in the economic sphere. On the contrary, to deny the importance of human subjectivity and purposefulness is to attempt to reduce Marxism to a purely scientific theory, to fall under the spell of a sort of neo-Hegelianism which would submit the march of history to the control of an absolute and universal reason. The richness and originality of Marxist theory lies precisely in that it is linked to revolutionary practice – which, as it unfolds, confirms or challenges the theory which initially oriented and inspired it. Without this dialectical relation between theory and practice, Marxism would ossify into an academic orthodoxy easily manipulated by those who wield the machinery of power.

This primacy of practice has led Marxists to recognize that their conception of religion is sometimes religious, in the sense of dogmatic, cut off from historical practice. To avoid that pitfall and in light of what is happening in Latin America today, the Second Congress of the Cuban Communist Party approved a resolution which states:

“The significant process by which Christian groups and organizations, including Catholic and other clergy members, have actively and massively joined the struggles for national liberation and social justice of the peoples of Latin America, as in Nicaragua, El Salvador and elsewhere, as well as the growth of œcumenical institutions and centers which carry on decidedly progressive activities and encourage the political commitment and unity in struggle of revolutionary Christians and Marxists on behalf of deep social transformations throughout the continent, have demonstrated the importance of fostering the successive consolidation of the common front for the indispensable structural transformations of our hemisphere and the whole world.”

The greatest advance in the relations between Christianity and a people's regime is currently taking place in Nicaragua where, for the first time in history, Christians have actively participated in the liberation process. This fact alone is sufficient to reject the axiomatic nature that some have given to the assertion that “religion is the opium of the people.” This is why, also for

the first time in history, a revolutionary party in power – the Sandinista National Liberation Front – has issued an official statement on religion (October 1980) which says:

"Some authors have asserted that religion is a mechanism of human alienation used to justify the exploitation of one class by another. This assertion undoubtedly has historical validity insofar as religion has provided the theoretical support for political rule in various historical periods. It is enough to recall the role of the missionaries in the process of conquest and colonization of the Indians of our country. Nevertheless, we, the Sandinistas, state in the light of our own experience that when Christians inspired by their own faith are able to respond to the needs of the people and of history, these same beliefs lead them to a revolutionary commitment. Our experience shows that one can be at once a believer and a consistent revolutionary and that there is no contradiction between these two things."

False certainties are therefore being overthrown by historical practice. In the last twenty years, in Third World countries, particularly Latin America, Christianity has revealed its liberating character as the expression of the resistance and struggle of the oppressed. Moreover, giving the lie to all academic predictions, religion has not disappeared in the socialist regimes. On the contrary, the Churches now constitute an important force in the struggle for peace and the number of faithful is on the rise (on this, see the recent Document of the Cuban Bishops' Conference on Peace). Problems undoubtedly continue to exist both inside and outside the Church. Inside the Churches, bishops and priests have not yet achieved sufficient clarity and agreement on how their pastoral involvement should proceed in socialist regimes. Moreover, among the ruling parties, anti-religious prejudices foster discrimination and drive Christians towards counter-revolutionary currents.

It is also a fact that various taboos concerning socialism continue to exist among Christians. Capitalist propaganda has been strong enough to activate frightening fantasies which cause insecurity and fear. The sectarianism of certain Marxist activists also often bolsters the image of socialists as new Crusaders fighting for a faith with totalitarian consequences. While it is more difficult nowadays to find the vehement anti-Communist proclamations of Pius XII's time in official documents of the Catholic Church, one will also be at pains to find much sympathy for socialism in them. But one can note certain doctrinal and political openings: the primacy of the social character of property, socialization of wealth, the primacy of the right to use over the right to own and, in the political field, the Vatican's realist diplomacy of establishing closer relations with almost all socialist countries.

One of the rare examples of a clear option in favor of socialism originating among bishops can be found in the regional documents published in the darkest period of the Brazilian military dictatorship, when the Church itself was under intense fire:

"We must defeat capitalism. It is the greatest evil, accumulated sin, the rotting root, the tree that bears the fruit we know so well: poverty, hunger, disease, death for the great majority. For that it is necessary to overcome private ownership of the means of production (factories, land, commerce, banks)... For that we want a world with one people, undivided between rich and poor." (Marginalization of a People, Document of the Bishops of Central-Western Brazil, May 6, 1973).

Although less well-known, the argument of this other document is better articulated:

"The historical process of class society and capitalist rule leads fatally to clashes between the classes. Although it is a fact everyday more obvious, this clash is denied by the oppressors, but their very denial is a further confirmation. The oppressed masses of workers, peasants and the many underemployed are growing aware of this and progressively feeling a new desire for liberation. The ruled class has no other way to liberate itself than to continue the journey which has already begun along the long and difficult path which leads to social ownership of the means of production. This is the main foundation of a gigantic historic perspective of global transformation of present society into a new society which will make it possible to create the objective conditions for the oppressed to reclaim the humanity of which they have been despoiled, to shed the chains of their suffering, to put an end to class antagonism and, finally, to conquer freedom." (I Have Heard the Cries of My People, Document of Bishops and Religious Superiors of North-Eastern Brazil, May 6, 1972).

Marxists and Christians share more archetypes than our vain philosophy would allow. One of these is the utopia of human happiness in the historical future – a hope which becomes mystical in the practice of many activists who do not fear to sacrifice their own life. Marx calls this fullness the realm of freedom and Christians, the Kingdom of God. In the third volume of *Capital*, he writes that:

"The realm of freedom begins where labor is no longer determined by necessity and external pressure; the realm of freedom is situated, of necessity, beyond the borders of material production."

Yet nothing in politics or history can guarantee the fulfillment of this goal, just as the salvation hoped for by Christians has no historical explanation, being a gift of God. But there is, deep down in our selves, the desire common to countless Marxists and Christians to see humanity eliminate all the barriers and contradictions that divide and separate humans. And the irresistible hope that the future will be like a table set for all to share fraternally plentiful bread and the joy of wine. The road that can lead us to this aspiration, overthrowing prejudice and fostering unity, will certainly not be that of theoretical discussions, but that of real commitment to the liberation struggle of the oppressed.

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The emergence of revolutionary Christianity and liberation theology in Latin America opens a new chapter and poses exciting new questions which cannot be answered without a renewal of the Marxist analysis of religion, Löwy writes. One of the best illustrations of this observation is the following dialogue, reported by Frei Betto, between himself and the policeman of the Brazilian dictatorship in charge of his interrogation:

- How can a Christian collaborate with a communist?
- For me, men are not divided into believers and atheists, but between oppressors and oppressed, between those who want to keep this unjust society and those who want to struggle for justice.
- Have you forgotten that Marx considered religion to be the opium of the people?
- It is the bourgeoisie which has turned religion into an opium of the people by preaching a God, lord of the heavens only, while taking possession of the earth for itself.

Michael Löwy was born in 1938 in São Paulo, Brazil; he has lived in Paris since 1969. He works as a sociologist and research director at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. He has published several books on the history of Marxism (translated into Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian, Turkish, Japanese, etc) including: *La Théorie de la révolution chez le jeune Marx* (Paris: Maspero, 1970); *The Marxism of Che Guevara* (New York: Monthly Review, 1971); *Les marxistes et la question nationale 1848-1914* (with G. Haupt and C. Weill, Paris: Maspero, 1974), *Georg Lukacs: From Romanticism to Bolshevism* (London: New Left Books, 1978); *Le Marxisme en Amérique latine* (Paris: Maspero, 1980); *The Politics of Uneven and Combined Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution* (London: New Left Books, 1981); *Paysages de la vérité* (Paris: Anthropos, 1986); and *Rédemption et utopie - Le judaïsme libertaire en Europe centrale* (Paris: PUF, 1988). He is a collaborator of the International Institute for Research and Education..

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