

RELIGION AND REVOLUTION A BRIEF FOR THE THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

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I

Revolution is a total and ongoing process. All aspects of society, civil, as well as political, are affected. Base, superstructure, praxis must all change. The revolutionary experience indicates that these changes are always uneven: unequal development, resistance to change, counter-revolution have been the rule. Such generalizations aside, the revolutionary universe is murky, fraught with questions, besieged and confounded by debatable answers. Such is our burden, in particular, when we approach the problem of the relation between religion and revolution, and perhaps nowhere more so than in respect to Latin America.

Marx and Engels' systematic and emphatic rejection of religion as a source of revolution has added to this burden. In attempting to establish socialism on a rational and scientific basis, they in essence obviated religion as a valid concern. Scientific socialism could not accept religion as the moral and ethical fount of revolution and liberation. Although Marx understood religion as a necessary palliative for the alienation felt by men in class dominated societies, it could play no role in societies liberated from the false consciousness necessary for such domination.

Engels, who treated religion, especially Christianity, more explicitly than did Marx, appreciated it as a powerful motivating force except for the fact that it led men in the wrong direction. ¹ The salvation which it promised was to come in the afterlife. The modern workingmen's movement, in contradiction, held salvation to be an earthly task with earthly fulfillment. God and the Kingdom of Heaven were false and irrelevant goals upon which to build a revolutionary movement.

For Marx and Engels, religion and revolution were antithetical both as concepts and as realities. Revolution, as a resolution of class conflict, must be driven by class consciousness. Religion obscures such consciousness. Its palliative role has been a weapon of class domination. It has taught acceptance, passivity and fatalism on the one hand, and on the other justification for those who dominate. Religion as a formal structure has traditionally been

associated with the status quo and reaction.

The classical revolutionary indictment of religion would certainly seem to hold true when applied to much of Catholicism's history in Latin America. For three hundred years of colonial hegemony, the church had contributed to a culture of domination. Its symbols and beliefs filtered Latin America reality. Anyone acculturated to that reality, religious or not, could not avoid being in some way molded by church perceptions. This was true in the secular realm as much as it was in the religious. The ultimate separation of church and state in the mid- and latter- 19th Century, encouraged by various liberal and radical movements, could not totally separate the religious from the now rational, positivistic profane. Church symbols were still everywhere. The church established the first and most prestigious universities. It built and serviced hospitals and charities. It blessed new governments. The cardinal appeared with the President and the leaders of the military in public ceremonies. Catholicism's influence continued to be intimate and integral to social life. To be sure, religious beliefs and practices have had a bifurcated development in Latin America. For the rich and the middle sectors, the church remained the religious medium. The poor took a more individualized, less regulated path. When for various reasons a shortage of clergy occurred, many, especially the poor, remained uninitiated in the recognized rites and sacraments. These unevangelized people maintained more personal, more fatalistic, and passive ways. The rich and poor often worship different saints, or call the same saints different names. The poor have syncretized the Catholic pantheon with their own pre-Columbian gods. This dualized religious structure conformed nicely to a basically Thomistic world view wherein religion and social structure (very much inclusive of class relations) were meant to confirm each other in a perfectly hierarchical architectonic universe.

What was imported from Iberia for the purpose of domination thus has remained an integral instrument of hegemony to this day. Roman Catholic themes, such as hierarchicalism, corporatism, the relationship between faith and reason, a certain Manicheism leading to totalism and maximalism continue to pervade Latin societies today, extending from a religious core to deep involvement in the profane life of the people. Yet, paradoxically, just as these concepts were intensely important in the structuring of societies of domination and subjugation since the conquest, they also remain emergent and influential in some transformed state even where revolutions have taken place. This is so in Nicaragua. It is also so in El Salvador, where religion has an enormous influence over the revolutionary process and has provided the inspiration for many contemporary revolutionaries.

In general the Catholic value system is more pervasive in Latin America than the identifiable institution of the church and has become more complex and varied, especially in the last three decades, since the emergence of the

Theology of Liberation. Religion today plays a role as a moral and ethical fount of revolution and liberation. How are we to understand this development?

Pre-Liberation Catholic thought and values, emanating from 13th century Thomistic ideology seasoned with a number of Iberian ingredients, coincided well with the need to justify conquest, enslavement, hierarchical colonization and the peculiar love-hate relationship with Europe and the United States that characterizes Latin America's dependent role in the world economy. Although it cannot be argued with Latin societies were ever really closed systems, the challenges of rationalism, liberalism, empiricism, positivism and Marxism have never successfully overwhelmed this Catholic value set. Religious elements in Latin cultures have been so pervasive that Catholicism's challengers have themselves taken the guise of secular religions so that struggles for hegemony have always been intensely maximalist and asserted as non-debatable ideological rationalizations.

Because the church, as a political-economic institution, as well as ideological legitimator, has been so central to Latin American life, it has always been the primary focus of attack by those who wished to 'modernize' the society. In the 19th century, when liberalism was seen as Latin America's path to modernization, it was an anti-clerical liberalism that was used to justify the placing of church lands in the private domain. This assault ultimately left the church separated from the state in most Latin nations and moved most civic matters, such as marriage, burial, and education to the secular realm. All of this was a real defeat for the church. But the Catholic value system, firmly planted during 300 years of conquest and colonization, remained entrenched in the Latin mentality as a basic structural form within which secular concepts would find their transformational cues and their validity as a reference for acceptable practices.

Religion, in this structural sense, is a language. It has its own vocabulary, grammar, and history. It is a language used to relate God, people, and society. Catholicism, as such, infuses the secular languages spoken in Latin America. It is more pervasive than Spanish or Portuguese. It is integral to the many tongues used by Latin Americans. It is a bridge uniting in many perceptions, people of diverse backgrounds and ethnicities. It has its local ethnic and class nuances and more obvious distinctions. But that which occurs to people will be perceived and discussed using in some part Catholic vocabulary and grammar and will happen within the limits and to the extent established by its conceptual boundaries. It may be a more pervasive element in some Latin societies than in others, for some groups more than others. This is for the researcher to investigate. But it is there and an element to be reckoned with if what happens and what is possible in Latin American societies is to be understood.

Capitalist and Marxist economists, or even revolutionaries, may be able to conjure up the most objective, logical, rational and empirical pictures of the

political economy along with all the imperative prescriptions for its amelioration. But these prescriptions will not be feasible if 'objective' conceptions exclude the consciousness of the people for whom they are designed. In Latin America, an understanding of this 'consciousness' must include a grasp of the struggle for ideological hegemony that besets the Catholic Church today.

II

This Latin American conflict emerged and coincided with Catholicism's overall attempt to respond to the challenges of the modern world. The European Church made this attempt in Vatican II in the first half of the 1960s.² Although many Latin American priests and bishops attended its sessions, this essentially European conclave responded to modern challenges in a language which did not correspond to the Latin reality. Neither were the challenges perceived always the same as those which confronted the Latin Americans.

The ostensible problem for the Church of Rome was how to confront a Europe of science, reason, atheism, and Marxism with an institution and a theology constructed in the Middle Ages. Churchmen wondered if their church had anything to say to this world. The more basic question was whether a loving and just God was still a tenable concept in a Europe that had experienced two world wars, including the Holocaust, and the possibility of nuclear annihilation. This essentially European church also faced and was forced to respond to the fact that by the end of the century a majority of its adherents would be Third World people. In light of this, the church had to supply some answers to the increasingly impoverished lives of this evolving majority. The church responded using the vocabulary of the Catholic Social Justice Tradition which owed much of its approach to the work of Pope Leo XIII and European churchmen who followed in his path. It should be remembered that Pope Leo made St. Thomas the official philosopher of the Catholic Church and extolled the 13th century as the finest. In this light, Vatican II's responses were traditional. However, the Church accommodated the modern world by stating that science and technology were no longer enemies but instead partial answers to the world's problems. This technology developed in the First World was to be extended to the Third. With so much focus on material deprivation and material productive capability, the church would supply the spiritual counter to materialism. In sum, the rich were implored to give technology to the poor in the spirit of charity and justice. In that man cannot live by bread alone, faith supplied by the church would be the transcendent factor, faith beyond reason.

The Third World bishops who attended this council generally encouraged its concern for issues of social justice and its more progressive responses. But, for the Latin Americans a different approach was imperative. Fidel Castro's success had encouraged a Marxist revolutionary process throughout

Latin America. Hardly a country had been spared the activities of urban guerrilla cells and rural *focos*. The Central American uprising, including the Sandinistas and the Salvadorian movements, had their genesis in the early 60s. In addition, a severe shortage of clergy and a growing Protestant evangelical pressure challenged the continued dominance of Catholicism. Many Latin American Catholics now perceived their church to be in crisis.

This crisis of the Church was rooted in the crisis of Latin American societies themselves. The demography of Latin America was changing. Population was increasing at a phenomenal rate. The agriculture base, continually super-exploited to produce export crops or huckstered in speculative deals, or explored and mined for mineral exports, was no longer hospitable to the growing numbers of the rural poor. They left the land and migrated to the cities in increasing numbers. Foreign investment, especially from the United States, required the urban concentration of cheap labour. But, not all who came were to be fully employed. The shantytowns housing these poverty stricken people proliferated. As a rationale for continued exploitation and in response to a real concern about the revolutionary possibilities in these countries, the U.S. encouraged a two-pronged development scheme. Couched in academically concocted terms, such as 'meeting the needs of the revolution of rising expectations,' 'reaching the point of takeoff,' 'modernization,' the U.S. encouraged the Latins to welcome further investments, and especially to modernize the military to maintain the stability necessary for development.

Encouraged by Vatican II's new focus on the poor, and so the universal Church's awareness of the growing importance of its Third World population, the Latin American Church began to take measures and became increasingly open to struggles which in turn began to transform Latin American Catholicism itself. Latin American churchmen knew that the analyses and answers supplied by a European conclave did not apply to their reality as they were beginning to understand it. Thus the Church in Latin America, although it also faced a contemporary crisis, remained a more important actor, than the European Church, and the population, for the most part, were believers.

Secondly, the language of developmentalism, along with its emphases on technological solutions and its reliance on the primary role of the First World, contradicted the reality of Latin American experience. In most cases, the burgeoning poor of Latin America seemed light years away from being able to appropriate the use, let alone the benefits, of advanced technology. Furthermore, Latin American analysts were aware that when technology arrived in their world, it came as part of capitalist investment, seeking capital intensive methods which exacerbated unemployment and poverty. Along with this awareness was a growing understanding of the satellite status of the Latin economies in the world market system. The Latin role was to enrich the First World at the intensifying expense of its own populations. This had been so since the conquest and was no less so in the modern era. Rome's encouragement of this relationship indicated a deep lack of understanding of

the Latin American situation. Therefore, as the European Church seemed to refocus its mission in enunciating 'a preferred option for the poor,' its solutions seemed completely contradictory to that preference in Latin America.

III

The Latin American Bishops addressed these contradictions as they met in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968.³ They also attempted to understand the dismal state of their own political, economic, and spiritual reality. For a number of Bishops, the facts of Latin impoverishment, as demonstrated by their own social scientists, were new and shocking. Although the bishops legitimized a quest for answers, the responses which were to have a profound impact on Catholicism came from among the lower clergy and laity. These responses emerged, at one level, in the individual activities of Catholic revolutionaries; at another level, they took the form of the creation of theologies of liberation; and at a third level, they could be seen, pastorally and collectively, in the establishment of Base Ecclesial Communities.

Nestor Paz exemplified the individual response: the Catholic, inspired by religious principles, who becomes a guerrilla fighter.⁴ On October 8, 1970 this ex-seminarian died of starvation on the banks of the Mariapo River in Bolivia. He was about to turn 25 the next day. His 'nomme de guerre' had been Francisco after the great Saint Francis of Assisi whose love for the poor had inspired the young guerrilla to martyr himself. The kind of thinking that led to such individual behaviour was enunciated two years before Paz's death in a document submitted by 900 Latin American priests to the Latin American episcopate meeting in Medellin. In this document (which came to be known as 'Latin America: A Continent of Violence') the priests discussed the frustrations of people living under conditions of underdevelopment. They emphasized the growing desire of the people for fundamental change in the socio-economic structures of the continent. They Catholicized this process by stating:

... Because the privileged few use their power of repression to block this process of liberation, many see the use of force as the only solution open to the people. This same conclusion is being reached by many militant Christians whose own lives faithfully reflect the light of the Gospel.⁵

Nestor Paz viewed his revolutionary involvement as imperative to living life according to the Gospel. Becoming a guerrilla, fighting against those who oppressed the poor, was his attempt at discipleship. He saw himself in a line descending from Christ through his Colombian predecessor, Fr. Camilo Torres. His message on leaving to join the guerrillas in Teoponte begins with a quote from Camilo: 'Every sincere revolutionary must realize that armed struggle is the only path that remains.'⁶ Camilo, who was killed in a guerrilla action four years before his Bolivian disciple, had also concluded that the oligarchic forces of repression had a stranglehold on Latin American

societies.? He also believed that the only path to liberation was armed force. Both Nestor Paz and Camilo Torres died shortly after taking up arms. Neither was a great warrior. Neither engaged in extensive combat. Yet both are considered heroes and martyrs in an era that has seen only a small number of priest-guerrillas, but an all too large number of tortured and murdered religious people.

Enrique Dussel, among others, argues that Catholics, such as Nestor Paz and Camilo Torres, are just as much a part of the Catholic tradition as Fr. Sepulveda and the many Catholics who have stood for oppression or passive quiescence.⁸ It is true that the thread of progressive rebellion has run through the larger garment of retrogression and hierarchical hegemony from the first days of the conquest to the present. What distinguishes the rebellion and martyrdom of the last two decades is that it has become a pervasive and qualitative challenge to traditional Catholicism. Pragmatic steps taken by the church, conjoined with the revolutionary possibility first advanced by Cuba in 1959, have prompted a genuine and viable struggle to restructure the Catholic 'language.'

Although Colonial predecessors of Torres and Paz differed from these latter-day martyrs in a significant way, their resistance to injustice also was based on existing Catholic tradition and their individual compassion for the oppressed. The well-spring of this compassionate resistance is as old as Christianity itself. The loving rebel/martyr witnessing evil and denouncing it is Christ's example throughout the Gospels, and is, of course, a major theme of his sacrifice on the Cross. For the thin line of Catholic martyrs marching through history, this confrontation and sacrifice is *the* categorical imperative. It is at the heart of a certain Catholic existentialism which preaches, 'See evil. Denounce it with your bodies. This is your only choice.' It began in Santo Domingo in 1510 with the scathing sermons of the Dominican priest Montesinos and continued with the struggles of Bartolome de las Casas. It has never ceased.

The emergence of the Theology of Liberation has changed, however, the context of these denunciatory acts. It gives to the act of rebellion a new systematic base. In essence, it rationalizes rebellion, by shifting the focus and method of the church. This shift derived its basic orientation from the opening statement of Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*: 'The joys and the hopes, the griefs, and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. . . this community realizes that it is truly and intimately linked with mankind and its history.'⁹ This reference to mankind and its history is encapsulated in John XXIII's term, 'the signs of the times', first used in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* and repeated in the *Pastoral Constitution*. The concern for the 'signs of the times' expressed in these important documents signifies a change in the way theology is supposed to be done. Theology is now to be stood on its feet,

based on an inductive analysis of the conditions of people's lives. This is a 180 degree turn from a theology formerly derived from the deductive reference to first principles. This archaic method had been used to judge society, not on its reality, but on ideals generated in another age.

Gustavo Gutierrez conceives of the Theology of Liberation as a '*new way to do theology*': he maintains that 'Theology as critical reflection on historical praxis is a liberating theology, a theology of the liberating transformation of the history of mankind ... part of the process through which the world is transformed.' Of course for Gutierrez, as for other theologians of liberation, this liberating praxis is to be performed in the Latin American reality of underdevelopment.]° A basic credo of this theology is that faith evolves and has meaning as it relates to the life of the poor — *as they understand it*. This reference to understanding by the poor does not imply some mystical investment in a benighted and superstitious perception of reality. It is a reference to an active understanding honed through praxis. The term 'understanding' here also refers to the poor participating in the construction of their own reality. In the language of liberationism, the poor are to transform themselves from 'objects,' the passive recipients of history, to 'subjects'.

In this new Catholic language, 'the poor' has a much more extensive meaning, rooted in Latin America reality, than the Marxist term 'working class.' Although recognition of class and class conflict are integral to liberationism, massive unemployment and underemployment, and the size and suffering of a rural population which hardly resembles the proletariat, traditionally conceived, would make a focus on the working class much too narrow and exclusive. The really important point is that class conflict, broadly defined, is seen as a social reality. Liberationists, such as Gutierrez, deny that they prescribe this conflict. They merely recognize its existence as a function of unjust economies. And they side, in that conflict, with the poor who are the ones who will both interpret and create the 'signs of the time.'

A related theme involves the need to understand, for the purposes of action, the conditions of underdevelopment. Keys to this understanding come through an adaptation of certain constructs supplied by neo-Marxist and Marxist thought. The first of these is dependency theory. Without undertaking a deep and critical application of this theory, liberationists nevertheless generally contend that the overall impoverishment of their populations has been caused by the relegation of Latin America to the historical role of peripheral capitalist economy. Simply stated, their argument is that Latin America from the time of the conquest to the present has never been allowed to develop economies of productive and distributive justice. Instead, they were created and developed to serve a narrow spectrum of society, as this spectrum is linked to the internationally based economies of the first world.

Out of this recognition of class conflict and dependency emerges a tripartite analysis of violence. Not only liberationists *qua* liberationists, but the

bishops who met at Medellin, understood that the poor live regularly under conditions of 'institutional violence.' This is, first of all, violence implicit in physical, mental, and spiritual deprivation. This deprivation does violence to the humanity of the poor. It destroys the living and those not yet born. It is as simple as the impact that a mother's lack of protein has on the development of her fetus. It is as complicated as the refusal of a peasant to allow himself permission to recognize oppression for fear of the implications of that recognition. This violence destroys the bodies and inhibits the consciousness of the poor.

Secondly, it is recognised that when the poor attempt to organize in any way to confront these conditions, even peacefully and minimally, their attempts are smashed with the 'violence of oppressive reaction.' This dimension of violence has been a fact of life, whether the authorities are ostensibly civilian or military. It has been the reflexive reaction of an oligarchy who sees its status only in terms of the absolute subjugation of the poor.

'Revolutionary violence,' the third element in this trinitarian analysis, initially emerges as the poor's attempt to defend themselves. In a certain sense, revolution here is not prescribed. It is a natural and defensive outcome of insufferable conditions. It is certainly not a first choice. Reform, if it could come about, even in the minimal sense of allowing the poor to formulate and solve some of their immediate problems, and thereby gain a sense of dignity, would be much preferred. But liberationists recognized how threatening this reform is perceived to be by society's hegemonic forces.

The recognition of violence as a structural problem is followed by an interesting deviation from Catholic traditions in the portrayal of both sin and salvation as collective possibilities. Liberationism does not dismiss the possibility of individual sin, nor does it reject individual salvation. But, locating the source of this new theology in objective reality leads to the inevitable understanding of the impact of this reality on those who share it. If violence is primarily institutional and this violence brutalizes the humanity of both the poor who suffer and the rich who are bound by definition to perpetrate this violence, than this structure cannot help but produce a dialectic of sin. This sin is not minor and personal, it defines life. Likewise for salvation; if a society of oppression were to be transformed to one of distributive justice, the sinful imperative would be obviated and salvation from sin would be structural, and, therefore, collective.

In light of this emerging consciousness of the collective destiny which is structural, liberationism is elevated and developmentalism is rejected. This latter solution, so celebrated by western foreign policy-makers and social scientists alike, is seen by liberationists as just more of the same. Its trickle down potential is just as hierarchical as any structure of the past. It voids the basic emphasis on the need for the poor to define their own destiny, and, as was stated above, to transform themselves from objects to subjects. In addition, developmentalism intensifies the key dependency

relations between metropolitan and peripheral economies. It also promotes technological answers to what liberationists understand to be profoundly human questions. At the centre of liberationism is the quest to liberate the whole human: body, soul, and mind. This is admittedly a slow and initially small scale project. But, societies beset by collective sin were a long time in the making.

V

If tainted and brutalizing structures produce collective sin, liberation and collective salvation can only be achieved by the development of new structures. Liberationists call for 'ecclesiogenesis,' the birth of a new church.¹¹ This church, like the early Christian Church is to grow from the 'faith-practice' of the people. It is to be a grass roots church. It will meld the faith of early Christianity with the experience of the poor as they live their lives today. Its motor force is the praxis of people in struggle using the gospel as the core of this praxis. This church is to spin out of a continuous circle of observing, acting, and judging.

But what shape is this struggle to take? Here we come finally to the third level where pastoral and political work are combined in collective organization. There is the hope that the thousands of Base Ecclesial Communities, active throughout Latin America, will provide the nucleus for this 'ecclesiogenesis.'¹²

The BEC was not an idea prescribed by the Theology of Liberation. These communities were first established before liberationism was conceptualized as a theology. The method employed in the first BECs and adapted by many since was based on the thinking of Paolo Freire, the Brazilian educationist who designed literacy programmes for Brazilian peasants and who was involved in setting up the first base communities in Brazil in the early 60s and soon after in Chile.¹³ His goal was to teach progressive consciousness through literacy training by teaching the people to read using a vocabulary integral to their lives. This method has come to be known as 'conscientization'.

Ideally, a Base Ecclesial Community consists of a group of neighbours who meet regularly to pray and to reflect on biblical passages as these passages elucidate problems these people face in their daily lives. Essentially, these are action oriented spiritual groups. Problems addressed range from the personal to the political. Alcoholism, marital infidelity, garbage collection, unemployment, the need for a well or a school, are all problems addressed by these groups. Although the bishop of a diocese and local clergy are instrumental in establishing these communities, the leaders of individual groups come from the laity. The original purpose for the establishment of BECs was to overcome a shortage of clergy and to evangelize the enormous number of marginalized poor who had migrated to the cities. The BEC was not conceived of as an entity separate from the parish nor

was it ever thought to be the initial stage of the hoped-for ecclesio-genesis. However, the BEC emphasis on the grassroots poor, the methodology used in its meetings, and the oppressive and chaotic atmosphere of Latin America, have inspired visions of a reborn church revolutionizing the society at large. The pedagogical methodology used in the idealized BEC, plus the metaphor of an early Christian Church of oppressed and imperialized people, contribute to this liberationist eschatology.

Thousands of BECs now operate throughout Latin America and have made starts in other parts of the Third World as well as in the Southwestern United States. They are not all the idealized conscientizing cells. Some are. Many are merely community prayer meetings. In some, themes drawn from Exodus, Isaiah, and Luke inspire activities that are explicitly political. However, individual BECs are not designed to act as political units beyond the point of interacting with local authorities for local improvements. The basic function of a BEC is religious. It is meant to evangelize the unevangelized and to integrate marginalized neighborhoods into parish networks. It is the conscientizing methodology used within the BEC and the focus on problems, many of which have political implications which help to form individuals who may then involve themselves as political party activists, unionists and join the ranks of protestors or even become guerrilla fighters. Work with these communities has also radicalized clergy.

As a result, in countries such as El Salvador, Nicaragua, Chile and Brazil, activist laymen, and clergy have been harassed, jailed and are murdered. By contrast, because the term BEC has been touted at episcopal conclaves, nothing more than praying the Rosary by a group of elderly women will be labeled a BEC meeting by a proud parish priest. Because of this variegated approach to community and because little research has been done, it is difficult at this time to know whether the BEC is really the foundation of ecclesio-genesis or merely a metaphor for such a birth in the minds of theologians of liberation. It is probably both.

V

The advent of Camilo Torres and his disciples, the birth and unfolding of the Theology of Liberation, and certain activities and expectations of Base Ecclesial Communities, have caused an ongoing troubled reaction by the Vatican. Even if one were to be sceptical about the revolutionary potential of all of these developments and dismiss them as a limited rebellion in an otherwise enormously conservative institution, it is still notable that Rome has seen these developments as a real threat.

Soon after the Second Council of Latin American Bishops began to focus on the need for change in Latin America, the Vatican began to replace progressive bishops with conservative ones. This has taken place in country after country so that the overall hierarchy has begun to take on a

much more conservative posture. Recently a leading Brazilian theologian, Leonardo Boff, was called to the Vatican and after a lengthy inquisition was sentenced to a year of penitential silence. Boff was a leading proponent of ecclesiology and had compared the structure of the church to capitalist structures of domination and exploitation. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has authored two instructions on Liberation Theology, both highly critical. The Pope himself has issued words of caution and criticism. On his trip to Nicaragua, he openly admonished the Sandinista priest, Ernesto Cardenal, to obey his bishop and remove himself from politics. He has elevated contra defender Archbishop Obando y Bravo to Cardinal.

Although church scholars today believe that a certain *modus vivendi* has been reached between the Vatican and liberationists, a number of Rome's basic criticisms of the new theology still stand.¹⁴ These criticisms are interesting because they reveal the extent to which liberationists have identified with movements for change. They also provide some insight into the expectation held by both the Vatican and liberationists, that changes in Latin America Catholicism might have implications for revolutionary changes in society at large.

A primary criticism is that the Theology of Liberation depends on Marxism for its basic concepts.¹⁵ The Vatican's major fear is the identification of class conflict as a central characteristic of Latin societies. The church maintains that all classes must exist in harmony. This is a major thrust of the official Catholic Social Justice Tradition. The idea of class cooperation is at the heart of Christian Democracy.

The Vatican also rejects what it sees as a willingness to cooperate with Marxists on the part of liberationist factions. This combination of Marxist concepts and joint activity with Marxists leads Rome to fear that the Theology of Liberation, as expounded by some priests, is a prescription for revolution and the total demise of Catholicism in Latin America. In addition, the Vatican feels that the Theology of Liberation de-emphasizes the eternal spiritual message of the Church in favour of a materialistic focus on the here and now. Rome does not reject the material needs of people, but feels that true liberation will be achieved only as 'liberation from death through salvation in Christ.'

Aside from liberationism's proximity to class analysis, the Vatican reproaches this theology for what it claims is a total emphasis on the poor and its exclusion of the wealthy. It is interesting that in Guatemala, for example, the greatest defection to Protestantism has come from the middle sectors. In El Salvador, members of the wealthy right wing have indicted the Church for its communism and have encouraged the killing of priests. A number of Salvadoran officers have converted to evangelical Protestantism.

A key structural problem identified by Rome and emerging from the praxis

of the Base Ecclesial Community is the growth of a 'parallel magisterium.' The Vatican claims for itself the role of primary teacher. It is to be the ultimate authority within the church. If, as happens in Base Ecclesial Communities, ordinary people are allowed to interpret the Bible in terms of their own experience and believe and act on the basis of that interpretation, the primary authority of Rome is nullified. The role of the priest sanctioned by this authority is also undermined.

As a result, the hierarchical nature of Catholicism is in danger of collapse. In effect, a new religion, a religion of the people and without Rome's authority, fundamentally challenges the role and power of the Roman Church. Linked to its response to this challenge is Rome's rejection of the idea of sinful structures and collective salvation. A powerful centralized and hierarchical church maintains its authority because it is the vehicle that determines individual sin and the path of salvation. Therefore, the Vatican asserts that it is not structures that are sinful and produce evil people, but sinful people who use otherwise neutral structures to evil ends. It is these individuals who must be saved.

At the core of all these objections is a conflict over the role of theologians and theology itself. Rome, in spite of Vatican II, maintains that the Vatican teaches and theologians explain and propagate. The source of theological innovation must be centralized. The Theology of Liberation and the praxis of the BECs allow for myriad possibilities of decentralization.

All of this indicates that a profound and historic struggle is taking place within the church. In Latin America, where Catholicism is co-extensive and integral to the lives of the people, this struggle is crucial for society at large. If Catholicism has been a fount of civic values since the conquest, there is nothing to indicate that it will cease to be so. This is ever more so in that the Theology of Liberation is very self-consciously designed to be socially invasive. The conscientization, which takes place in many of the thousands of BECs, is meant to assault the parochial nature of the people and orient them toward social involvement. For a people who are basically religious, the sacred nature of their social involvement sanctions selfless activism in ways that transcend normal ideological commitment.

One cannot predict the outcome of this institutional conflict and reformation. But one can certainly say this. Where a revolution has occurred, as it has in Nicaragua, or where popular revolutionary struggles are still in motion, as in El Salvador and Guatemala, or even where the political scene is dominated by reformism or temporarily stable dictatorships, no serious analysis can be made if the role of religion is ignored. The emergence of the Theology of Liberation, and the role it plays in the struggle for ideological hegemony in Latin America, is transforming old notions of both religion and revolution. The impact of that transformation will be felt, indeed, it is already being felt, far beyond Latin America itself.

NOTES

1. Karl Marx, *Toward the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* and in Engels, for example, see *On the History of Early Christianity*.
2. All documentary references to Vatican II are from Walter M. Abbot, Si., General Editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*, (New York, 1966).
3. For the English version of the Medellin document, see 'The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council' (1973).
4. Nestor Paz, *My Life for my Friends* (Maryknoll, 1975).
5. *Ibid.* pp. 4-5.
6. *Ibid.* p. 21.
7. For a brief biography of Camilo Torres and a presentation of his work, see *Revolutionary Priest. The Complete Writings and Messages of Camilo Torres*, edited by John Gerassi (New York, 1971).
8. Enrique Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America* (Grand Rapids, 1981).
9. *Documents of Vatican II*, op. cit., pp. 199-200.
10. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, 1973).
11. Leonardo Boff discusses this concept at length in his very controversial work, *Church: Charisma and Power*, the writing of which caused this Brazilian theologian to be censured by the Vatican.
12. For a good summary discussion of the BEC, see Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology* (New York: 1987), pp. 63-70. This work is also a good general introduction to the Theology of Liberation. Pablo Galdamez, *Faith of a People* (Maryknoll, 1983) describes the life of a BEC in El Salvador. For a discussion of the BEC in Chile, see Lawrence Littwin, 'Base Ecclesial Communities in Chile,' unpublished paper delivered at the Latin American Studies Association Congress, Mexico D.F. 1984. Gustavo Gutierrez delivers a theological view of the BEC in his *We Drink from Our Own Wells* (Maryknoll, 1984). See also Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, 1987).
13. See his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, 1972) for a description of the methodology of 'conscientization.'
14. The evolution and nature of this *modus vivendi* is partially explained in the July 9-16, 1988 issue of *America* by Arthur F. McGovern and Thomas L. Schubeck in their article 'Updating Liberation Theology.'
15. These criticisms can be found in the 'Instructions' on the Theology of Liberation issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and authored by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in 1984 and 1986 respectively. The second instruction is considered by some to be a more conciliatory document.