

Presentation

Christianity of Liberation and Liberation Theology in Latin America



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Society and Culture publishes in this edition the special issue Christianity of Liberation and Liberation Theology in Latin America. It is an effort to gather the most recent analysis of the main specialists regarding this phenomenon, which has become less mediatic since the 2000s, but which remains alive in the Latin American context.

Liberation Theology (LT) has its origin mainly in Latin America, based on the convergence of internal and external changes that result from modernity lived by the Catholic Church and some protestant churches in the second half of the 20th century. It is a theological thought that is born from the perspective of interpreting Latin American reality in light of the Gospel, using Marxist terms and concepts, while also affirming a “preferential option for the poor”, in other words, a political choice guided by the notion of social class.

Liberation Christianity (LC) is formed by the assembly of all Christians whose social-religious practice influenced the construction of LT. We understand that for LC the option for poor is the structural foundation of all action. There is a change from sexual and family morality to social and political spheres. In this sense, it is called a Church of *práxis*, of the poor and of liberation. This form of religiosity, which is present mainly in Catholicism, is specially structured around Base Christian Communities (*Comunidades Eclesiais de Base* – CEBs), whose groups prefer a certain replacement of parish structure with small ecclesial communities. It is a Church formed of autonomous and self-sustaining communities, in which the traditional and vertical ecclesial structure gives way to a horizontal and network structure.

Therefore, Liberation Theology is an intellectual and spiritual expression of a social-religious movement preceding it and much deeper than it which we call Liberation Christianity. Although the Vatican II (1962-1965) had been an important element in the formation of LT, the importance of the Cuban revolution in 1959 and the popular movements of the 1950s and 1960s in Latin America cannot be disregarded. For example, in Brazil, Catholic Action, in particular the JOC (Catholic Workers' Youth – *Juventude Católica Operária*) and JUC (Catholic University Youth – *Juventude Universitária Católica*) contributed to the emergence of LT, which today guides, for example, the action of social and youth pastoral work. For this reason, we understand that social-religious practice precedes theological production, being that from the 1970s onwards there is a mutual relationship between them both.

Our goal is to reflect on the origin, development and actuality, beyond the convergence and divergence, of Liberation Christianity as well as Liberation Theology in Latin America. As we highlight above, we understand that there is a analytic and historical difference between them: while the Christianity of Liberation refers to social-religious movement, preceding LT, composed mainly of Catholic Action groups, of Base Christian Communities (CEBs), of social and youth pastoral work of the Catholic Church, and of

activists of social movements referenced at the beginning by the principle of the “preferential option for poor”, Liberation Theology is a set of texts elaborated with reference to this movement and which appears at the end of the 1960s (Rubem Alves), develops in the 1970s (Gutierrez, Richard, Dussel, Assmann, Melano), and projects to world in 1980s (Boff), re-news itself in feminist and ecological perspectives in the 1990s and 2000s (Gebara, M. Althaus-Reid, Tamez) and currently begins to permeate new themes in which pervade the idea of the excluded in Latin America (Hinkelammert, Jung Mo Sung).

Thus, the liberation Christians are all people that participate in social and ecclesial projects based on Liberation Theology, considered as a theological production pertaining to Latin America and which has as an essential element the liberation of the poor, a notion influenced by concepts of social class. It is mainly in catholic contexts that this theology develops as a minority but influential catholic anti-capitalist stream. Even with a hostility from Rome during the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, it continued to develop in Latin America, serving as an example for Catholicism in other regions of the world, such as Europe and Africa, and approaching the Vatican since the arrival of Pope Francis.

Despite the conservative positions of the Pope regarding the rights of women to control their body and of sexual morality in general, Francis has assumed social political positions on the left. His intellectual, spiritual and political formation are sustained by a Theology of the People, a non-Marxist variant of Argentinian Liberation Theology. He adopted name of Saint Francis, who is considered a friend of the poor. He gave an important homily at the Italian port of Lampedusa, an entry point for refugees, denouncing the “globalization of indifference” with a criticism of the inhumanity of European policies with relation to immigrants.

We could mention a series of actions by Pope Francis to exemplify our argument: the meeting with Gustavo Gutierrez, an icon of Liberation Theology, in September 2013; the beatification (2015) and canonization (2018) of Oscar Romero, former bishop of

San Salvador (El Salvador's capital city) and activist of human rights; the homage to the memory of Luis Espinal Camps, in July 2015 in Bolivia; the speech against capitalism in Bolivia in the city of Santa Cruz on the occasion of the World Meeting of Popular Movements in 2015; the reception at the Vatican in 2014 of leftist activists Alexis Tsipras and Walter Baier to begin a process of dialogue between Marxists and Christians whose most recent meeting took place in Greece in August 2018. Finally, Francis was denounced as a "Marxist Pope" by Rush Linebaugh, a North-American journalist, to whom he responded politely declining this adjective, meanwhile adding that he was not offended because he "knew many Marxists who were good people".

From an interdisciplinary perspective this special issue selected proposals that analyze the intellectual and historical importance of this Christian tendency and which also looks to understand the current expressions of this Christianity, mainly catholic, that is once again receiving the attention of the Vatican (as we have tried to show) since the arrival of Pope Francis in 2013 and the publication of *Laudato Si* in 2015. In this sense, it is also necessary to understand contemporary expressions of this tendency in the context of Francis' papacy. We found in current research new theological perspectives built on this strand, of which we can cite feminist, indigenous, ecological, queer, black, decolonial, religious pluralism theologies, amongst others.

In this sense, it is important to mention that the Liberation Theology is a critical reflection on the revolution (Gutierrez) and, for this reason, it does not depend only on the ecclesial context, but, above all, on the revolutionary context (Miguel Bonino, J. Segundo). And, even though the social-political context of Latin America is not the same as in the 1960s, there is a structural continuity (dependent capitalism, coloniality of knowledge and power, etc.) that deserves to be analyzed. Hence the importance of studying the challenges of Liberation Christianity as a social-religious practice animated by the cries of impoverished people.

Below we present a synthesis of what can be found in the articles that form this volume.

Ivone Gebara's article, a feminist theologian, opens this special issue with a debate about the role of women in Liberation Theology. The author, who can be considered an organic intellectual of Christianity of Liberation, traces important criticisms about the absence of the feminine figure in the elaboration of LT in view of its strong identification with Catholicism, traditionally patriarchal, and its self-production inside the institution. In counterpart, Gebara presents the initiatives of the main women liberation theologians, on fringes of ecclesial hierarchy, in search of gender equity inside this social-religious movement.

Following on from Gebara, there is a text of Enriqueta Lerma Rodriguez and Adriela Pérez Pérez, that also deals with the role of women in Liberation Theology, now in a local context, in borderlands between Chiapas, in Mexico, and Guatemala. The analysis of the role of women, referred to in LT, in this specific context highlights that the Christianity of Liberation needs to open up to other theological insights beyond the classical contributions received mainly in dialogue with the social sciences. Other theoretical-methodological frameworks present in identity movements, especially the feminist and Black movement, ought to be incorporated in this theology to complement the social class perspective.

This issue continues with a contribution from Fabio Lanza, Luis Gustavo Patrocino and Lenir Assis, who discuss the presence of Liberation Theology in the contemporary contexts of base Christian communities. The text analyzes the 14th Inter-ecclesial of CEBs (base Christian communities) in 2018, with goal of identifying the expressions of Christianity of Liberation present today in these communities which are the fomenting basis this Latin-American theology.

In sequence, there is an article by Wellington Teodoro da Silva and Paulo Agostinho N. Baptista's article on the debate about the revolution in the progressive church in Brazil. The text

helps us to understand the role of leftist social movements on the transformation of Christian groups and Catholic leadership of reformist bent who thereafter assumed a radical position in defense of the excluded. The contact with secular left groups enabled Christians, mainly youth, to begin to elaborate possible ways towards a concrete participation in revolutionary movements in Latin America.

Verónica Giménez Bélevean and Marcos Andrés Carbonelli discuss the reality of Liberation Theology in Argentina and its relationship with the Theology of the People. The authors demonstrate the role of this theology in resistance to neo-liberalism in the country. They also highlight a renewal achieved by Christianity of liberation with the arrival of Pope Francis to the Vatican. The authors contacted contemporary activists which have updated the legacy of the perspective of liberation in terms of political participation and in the ecclesial environment.

The contribution of Félix Pablo Friggeri brings the concepts of *praxis* and *poor*, as well as the notion of person and popular knowledge, to discuss the presence of Liberation Theology in Latin American social struggles. The article collates production around this theology with perspectives from Indo-American socialism, Peronism and Pope Francis' writings.

Graham McGeoch discusses the concept of human rights present in Liberation Theology and the role of Christianity of Liberation in the struggle for democracy. The author argues that these Christians need to exercise some self-criticism in the sense of re-thinking the theme of human rights and democracy going beyond the meta-narratives in the sense of recovering their fundamental cause which is liberation.

André Ricardo de Souza, Breno Minelle Batista and Giulliano Placeres present two catholic tendencies which are opposed in the Brazilian context: one is linked to Catholicism of Liberation, represented by Cáritas; the other one is Charismatic Catholicism, supported by catholic TV stations Canção Nova and TV Século XXI.

These two different strands of political action have distinct logics with regard to the theme of economy. While *Cáritas* focuses its practices on the pursuit of an economy of solidarity, the charismatic TV stations practice a pragmatic politics, associated with religious agents and catholic parliamentarians, in search of their financial sustaining.

Finally, Johan Konings reflects on an interpretation of the meaning of Liberation Theology in Latin America. The author analyzes the consequences of a popular Bible reading in the production of the hermeneutic of liberation which sustains the practices of Christians of liberation in region. It is an indispensable theological approach to understanding the phenomenon presented in this special issue, by means of which we can understand the paths taken by this theology in its dialogue with the decolonial and ecological paradigms.

The diversity of the areas of expertise of the authors, the plurality of approaches and themes on this subject propose a contemporary analysis of the meaning of Christianity of Liberation and Liberation Theology in Latin America. It is an attempt to understand the configuration of this social-religious theory and practice at the beginning of the 21st century, marked by the process of deinstitutionalization of religion and accompanied by an accelerated decrease of believers in Brazilian and Latin American Catholicisms.

The recent social-political changes experienced in Latin America (the development of Pentecostal Churches, strengthening of conservative governments, religious fundamentalisms, among others) obliges us to re-think the role of religion (both as a justifying of power and as a protest movement) in this new millennium. Therefore, we consider that this issue is not only relevant, but fundamental to understanding the tensions as well as the prefiguration of Liberation Theology.

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