

Whatever happened to liberation theology? God's "option for the poor": God's "option for the poor"

by [Nancy Bedford](#) in the [October 20, 1999](#) issue

Not long ago, a retired pastor and theologian who had lived and taught in Buenos Aires in the early 1970s came back to visit. He had some pressing questions: What does liberation theology mean to you people today? What authors do you read in your seminary classes? What aspects of liberation theology still seem relevant to you?

The questions were pointed and timely. Several of us entered into a heated discussion with our visitor, out of which a relative consensus emerged: We do read the classic texts of Latin American theology (Gutiérrez, Boff, Segundo, Sobrino, Míguez Bonino and others), some of them for their historical importance, others for their continuing relevance. Some of the insights provided by the first phase of liberation theology seem too important to let slip between the cracks—for instance, the centrality of the category "the poor" for biblical interpretation; the awareness of structural, not just individual, evil; the use of the social sciences as dialogue partner for theological discourse; and the need to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion to theology itself.

It seemed to us that another virtue of Latin American liberation theology had been to alert North American and European theologians to the fact that they, too, were producing contextual theology, from a perspective no less particular than that of their Latin American colleagues. Our visitor nodded, took notes, and finally probed with clinical precision: But would you say liberation theology is dead? Oh no, certainly not dead, we replied, with varying tones of conviction. But one must think in terms of a dialectical process in which the core insights are taken up into the consideration of new problems, new situations and new questions.

Latin America is a very illuminating place to do theology; it is a fruitful locus theologicus. When I describe everyday life in Argentina to my North Atlantic friends, they often say it reminds them of the magical realism of Latin American literature and film. In Latin America one seems to move in a sort of hyperreality.

During the previous (Southern hemisphere) summer, the electrical company cut off power to a large portion of Buenos Aires. The company is one of the public services that were swiftly privatized in recent years, supposedly to help pay the foreign debt (though the debt is now larger than ever). Thousands of people living in high-rise apartment buildings were without light, water or elevators for many days, though they had paid their rather steep electricity bills.

In response to the apparent indifference or incapacity of the authorities, protest broke out. One method of protest was to put up roadblocks made up of unused electrical appliances such as fans, washing machines and refrigerators. Other protesters burned tires. One could walk along a street with no working street lamps and see masses of electrical appliances and greasy, exhausted faces in the flickering light of the bonfires. All those appliances, objects of desire, bought dearly with a multitude of payments and small sacrifices, were supposed to make life more pleasant. Yet they had become useless because of larger structural problems—in this case, the policies of a company interested not in the common good or in providing responsible service, but only in making a profit.

This hyperreal parable illustrates how Latin American reality so often shows the absurdity of Mammon's plan of salvation by exposing its cruelty. When profit is the only motor that fuels people's actions, society eventually falls apart. Latin American reality continually makes this point in many ways, both large and small. It is good for Christian theologians to be forced daily to remember that one cannot serve both God and Mammon—an insight that was one of the principal themes of the first generation of Latin American liberation theologians.

Jon Sobrino has written that as long as there is suffering, poverty, exclusion and premature death on an immense scale—which is ever more the case in Latin America—there will be need for a theology (whatever its name) that poses the kinds of questions posed by liberation theology. One of the most important questions for Sobrino is, to use the words of Gustavo Gutiérrez: "How do we tell the poor of this world that God loves them?" The emphasis seems correct to me.

Yet even if many of the questions posed by liberation theology are relevant, one cannot necessarily respond to them with identical answers or even necessarily apply the same method in obtaining those answers. For instance, in its first years, liberation theology was conceived as (second-order) reflection and discourse based on a (first-order) praxis of liberation from oppression, especially from social, economic and political injustice. The poor, and with them the church of the poor and its theologians, seemed to be on their way to becoming historical "subjects" or agents in the transformation of society. Time has shown that this was not to be the case. Latin American societies have, for the most part, become even poorer; the category of "the excluded" has been added to that of the poor and marginalized. Growing sectors of the populations are denied access to education, basic health services, or jobs that would allow even a precarious subsistence. The poor, the marginalized and the excluded are not significant consumers, much less players in the global market; they have no access to information highways and hardly a chance to shape any of the other significant byways of the process of capitalist globalization.

To this fact one must add that rather than making an "option for the poor," many members of the former middle class—the mainstay of many non-Pentecostal Protestant churches in Latin America—have found that impoverishment has made an option for them. This is especially true for old people, for the unemployed and for single women raising children, as well as for many of the descendants of the pre-Columbian inhabitants of "Our America," as José Martí called Latin America. At the same time, many of the poor and the recently impoverished have opted for participation in churches that embrace forms of the "prosperity gospel," which promises rapid physical healing and does not challenge structural injustices. What "praxis of liberation" is to be recommended and reflected upon in these circumstances? In what ways can theology correspond faithfully to the God of its calling in this context?

Several factors need to be taken into account in order to find some answers to these questions. The poor tend to be politically weak because their continual struggle for survival is not conducive to sustained organization and mobilization. A theological praxis of liberation today needs to be conscious of these limitations. With a great deal of dry humor, Hugo Assmann wrote recently that he is astounded that no one pointed out to him in the 1970s how incredibly pompous the phrase "Pueblo oprimido, señor de la historia" (The oppressed people, lord of history") sounded. This

sort of comment reflects a tendency to revise the understanding of praxis: one's expectations of oneself as a theologian and of the actual possibilities of a transformative praxis as a whole are perhaps more humble and limited than they would have been 30 years ago. This does not lead to resignation or apathy, but it does mean that the joy and the pleasures of life need to be allowed for by theology even in the midst of the pain caused by structural injustice—something many poor people have known all along.

Although the poor do often have valuable insights and wisdom, theologians must not overload them with messianic roles, as has sometimes occurred in the past. The phrase "option for the poor" is first of all a theological statement about God's choice and should not lead to any romanticism about what the poor are or should do for the world. Nevertheless, the social and political dimensions of the gospel cannot be trivialized or overlooked by any theology or theopraxis that desires to take seriously the event of God in Jesus Christ.

To put it another way: the paradigm of the incarnation is now more meaningful to me and to others in Latin America than that of the Exodus. The Christology "from below" that helped theologians rediscover the historical dimensions of faith and the life of Jesus Christ is continually revitalized by a Christology "from above" that underlines that it really is the Triune God who chooses to walk on our paths in order to change them and us.

A critical theology today has a responsibility to bring up again and again in the public sphere the fact that it is in the public interest (and that includes the interest of the nonpoor) to work against poverty and social injustice and for a state capable of limiting the ravages of unleashed market forces. Some concrete topics that need to be addressed are the inequities of taxation; the need to invest in public education, health and transportation; and creative cooperation between nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the state. Sociological studies show that people are highly skeptical about professional politicians and all three branches of government. But that does not mean that political topics can be forgotten by theology.

One ray of hope today is the networking between NGOs and base-type communities of faith to address particular problems. These alliances can sometimes become structurally significant. This can be observed in the struggle to defend public school salaries, in forms of nonmonetary trading of goods and services, in incipient micro-

banks oriented especially toward financing projects designed and carried out by women, or in protests against corruption in the public sphere. Such efforts represent the sort of sociopolitical praxis that can realistically shed light on theological reflection for those who work with the heritage of liberation theology.

When I mention base-type communities of faith I am referring to congregations in which reading and interpreting the Bible and developing all the gifts of the Spirit given to the community are central. One of the things theology must do in this context is nudge and equip church members to find creative ways to well up in joy and generosity even out of extreme poverty, as the Macedonian churches once did, rather than looking only inward.

This kind of group is, however, by no means the only sort of church group in Latin America today. Much more spectacular are the new religious movements (within Christianity and without) which attract many thousands of participants. Scores of neo-Pentecostal groups meet in refurbished cinemas and offer entertainment and a kind of mass consolation that is attractive to many. The slogan of one of these groups is significant: "Pare de sufrir," that is, "Stop suffering!" The term "neo-Pentecostals" refers to communities of faith that don't belong to classical Pentecostalism and share only some of its characteristics. As sociologist of religion Hilario Wynarczyk explains, the sociological profile of these churches includes leadership by charismatic pastors and a system of practices that stresses divine healing, personal prosperity, spiritual warfare, ecstatic trances accompanied by speaking in tongues, laughing and fainting and liberation from evil spirits. Pentecostal theologian Norberto Saracco prefers to regard these groups as "post-Pentecostal." While Latin American adherents of classical forms of Protestantism tend to cringe at the catalog of practices common to such groups, it should be added that a pneumatology of power, such as displayed in neo-Pentecostal religiosity, often serves as a concrete answer to those who in ordinary life feel powerless, offering them a sense of dignity.

The impact of such groups should be understood as a significant sign of the times for the new generation of Latin American liberation theologians. The desire of so many people to "stop suffering" now, not in some utopian future, needs to be integrated into theology. Neo-Pentecostal practices point out the importance of the body and of an embodied theology.

One might also ask what a liberating theology has to say about the practices of expelling demons and miraculous healing that are central to many practicing Christians today in Latin America. It is significant that the word liberación as now used in many circles means "exorcism" rather than the overcoming of political and economic oppression. It would seem that such a wider liberation appears so remote to many people as to be meaningless, whereas the struggle against concrete evil spirits is extremely familiar to many persons with roots in traditional Latin American (including Afro-Latin American) religiosity. One task of theology in Latin America is to retrieve and refigure the rich symbols evoked by the clouds of powers and principalities dear to popular imagination and religion. But an equally important task is to point out both that they have a structural dimension and that Jesus Christ, in his humble way, made a mockery of those powers.

Latin America has such a wealth of symbols in part because it is made up of hybrid cultures; it contains a huge patchwork of ethnic and cultural influences and traditions. This implies a richness of perspectives that is now recognized. Whereas the first generation of Latin American liberation theologians was made up primarily of Roman Catholic priests and other male religious leaders, today there are many voices speaking from the perspective of gender or incorporating the rich symbols inherited from a pre-Columbian or an African heritage. There are also many theologians more at home with Luther and Calvin than with Thomas Aquinas. And there are others well versed in "postmodern" insights.

To speak of "postmodernity" in Latin America is admittedly rather polemical. One can certainly detect, for instance, a growing skepticism toward "modernity" in the form of master narratives and instrumental reason, possibly because Latin America has so often had a painful experience of these narratives and the exercise of such reason--experiencing them from the "reverse side of history," to use Gutiérrez's apt phrase. What one actually sees is premodern, modern and postmodern elements in one hybrid culture, in one city, in one person.

This complexity strikes me every night when I walk home after teaching. Amid the hum of the motors on the street, I also hear the clackety-clack of hooves hitting the cobblestones, the sound of a legion of cartoneros, people who scavenge in the streets each night trying to fill their horse-drawn carts with old newspapers, packing cartons, aluminum cans or edible scraps. Their carts are pre-modern; the newspapers they search for are typically modern; and the recyclers to whom they sell their tattered wares cater to largely postmodern concerns about preserving

resources. The cartoneros point out, with dignity, that they prefer to be called recicladores, recyclers.

Elements of postmodernity as an intellectual current are indeed increasingly present in Latin America. I consider this an ambiguous gift: on the one hand, postmodern tendencies open up spaces for the new perspectives and voices mentioned above; on the other hand, as the social critic Jane Flax notes, a hard-core kind of postmodernity which would postulate the death of history, of the human being and of metaphysics undermines the kind of critical reason that is necessary to counter the "master narrative" constituted by capitalist globalization. A prophetic confrontation with this idolatrous meta-narrative continues to be an important task of Latin American theology. Such a confrontation is needed to help neo- or post-Pentecostal Christians discern the difference between legitimate empowerment by the Holy Spirit and an individualistic doctrine of salvation.

Another task of theology is to cultivate and reflect upon the "small stories" in the community of faith without forgetting their connection to the "master narrative" of God's kingdom. I don't think we can "construct" the kingdom, but I do think that in the power of the Spirit we can anticipate it in small, significant ways. Latin American theology today lives by "hope against hope," in the apparently absurd confidence that small and humble practices of faith such as singing together or remembering the stories about Jesus can work toward rekindling a viable praxis of structural change. These practices also serve to empower and lend dignity to the poorest, while at the same time contributing to a sense of community.

One of theology's main tasks is to help the community of faith in its search for practices that truly follow in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth, in the midst of a great deal of ambiguity and provisionality. Therefore I have come to believe that theology in Latin America today is synonymous with the practice of spiritual discernment. Such discernment is never an individual task; it is nurtured in a community of faith that tries to follow Jesus the Christ by the power of the Spirit. It is very much a practical discipline, but not a pragmatic one. It avoids wishful thinking, living instead by hope. It makes use of whatever analytical tools it can acquire. It is finding new ways, in a new situation, tentatively yet critically, to rework doctrines such as Christology, pneumatology, eschatology and ecclesiology, taking into account the new questions that have arisen.

Christ is both liberator and healer. Both personal and structural "demons" must be recognized and dealt with as wisely as possible with the help of the Spirit. Our hope is both realized and future. Churches need to be places both of nurture and of prophetic denunciation. Such a theology of discernment combines both word and deed, operating with a sense of holistic mission.

Latin American liberation theology cannot provide a last reservoir of meaning for a jaded church that does not wish to seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness. Nor is it brought into existence by noble savages or by saints untainted by sin. But it does, by the grace of God, manage to discover enough glimmers of meaning to continue to labor joyously despite great trials, hoping against hope, looking for significant ways to let the "least of these" know how much God loves them.