Latin American Liberation Theology: Did it Liberate?

The Emergence and Development of Latin American Liberation Theology, Its Ability to Liberate, & Its Future

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Liberation theology tends to be present wherever oppression exists, and, consequently, liberation movements with theology at their core have become worldwide phenomena.\(^1\) The messages of hope and social change that liberation theology advocate strike a responsive chord to the underdeveloped and exploited two-thirds of our world.\(^2\) While liberation theologies vary depending on location, histories, perspectives, and beliefs, all forms share an unwavering commitment at their core: the fight for social justice.

Latin America is the only continent where the majority of the underdeveloped and oppressed are Christians, specifically Roman Catholics. This widespread Catholicism in the significantly impoverished region enabled Catholic Liberation Theology to thrive and have great influence after it blossomed in the late 1960s.\(^3\) One of the tools Latin American liberation theology utilized to give the poverty-stricken citizens inspiration and hope for a better tomorrow was the connection and identification with images and stories from the bible. The story from the Hebrew Scriptures of the exodus and liberation of the children of Israel from the tyrannical rule of the Egyptian pharaoh is a foundational narrative to liberation theology. It is an important reflection because it is a story of the uniting and creation of a people with a collective conscience as they emerged from oppression. Those who are oppressed today can easily identify with, as Robert McAfee Brown, a professor of theology and ethics, stated, “the oppressed peoples of yesterday,” or “the Hebrew slaves in the story.”\(^4\)

Liberation theology has now developed and evolved in Latin American for over four decades. It has had much influence in the events of the region and has moved thousands of people to let their voices be heard for a cause: the liberation of the poor and oppressed from unjust

\(^4\) Brown, 120.
political, economic, and social subjugation. Despite this development, influence, and inspiration, the people of Latin America continue to struggle and have yet to be liberated like the children of Israel whom they strive to emulate.

Photo 1. Map of Latin America

Setting the Stage: The History that Led to the Birth of Liberation Theology in Latin America

One single moment that constitutes the founding of Latin American liberation theology does not exist, nor did the theology emerge only from post-World War II ideals. The decentralized nature of its origin obliges one to understand how Latin America developed, or how the region became underdeveloped, and came to emerge as it did when liberation theology as a conscious movement broke onto the scene. To do this, one must go back to the late 15th century, with the arrival of the Spanish to Latin America.

Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of the West Indies in 1492 served as the start of European conquest in Latin America. It’s important to realize that, as Peter Worsley, a sociology professor, described, “When the Europeans first arrived...in the Americas, they often found themselves dealing with societies whose levels of economic development and cultural sophistication were superior or equal to anything Europe could show.”6 Almost immediately following this “discovery”, in 1494, Pope Alexander VI negotiated the Treaty of Tordesillas, which divided the “New World” between Spain and Portugal. This treaty served as the first acknowledgement of the relationship between the church and state in the “new” lands and gave the state control over the church.7 Deane William Ferm, a professor and interpreter of modern theology, explained that by forming this relationship early on, the “church and state worked hand in hand in the settlement of Latin America.”8 No distinction emerged between the ambitions of the clerical and military conquerors; both were equally violent in their methods of control of the native Amerindians.9 As Penny Lernoux, a journalist for the United States Information Agency who was stationed in Latin America beginning in 1961, observed:

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7 Ferm, 2.
8 Ibid, 3.
9 Ibid, 4.
From the moment Columbus set foot in the New World cross and sword had been indistinguishable. Priests and conquistadors divided the plunder in people and land – it was a toss-up which was the greedier. And long before Latin America’s military regimes installed their torture chambers the Inquisition was at work with whip and rock.  

By the start of the 1500s, Latin American society was divided into distinctive classes; the leaders of the church and state, mostly from Spain, were at the top, and the Amerindians, displaced and oppressed, at the bottom. During this time of brutal conquest and colonization, several strong voices emerged that protested the ways in which the Spanish treated the Amerindians and imposed Christianity. One of these men was Dominican Antonio de Valdivieso, who, in 1511, spoke passionately in a sermon against the oppressive nature of the Spaniards and defended the rights of the people. This sermon inspired Bartolomé de las Casas, who continued to help the Amerindians fight for justice through his writings and lectures. Bartolomé de las Casas was later seen by many liberation theologians as the Moses of Latin American liberation theology. These voices of resistance were the first to speak on behalf of the oppressed and to allow their struggles to be heard, and they are generally seen as the first sparks of what would eventually emerge as the theology of liberation.

Struggles for independence from colonizers throughout Latin America occurred from 1808 until 1831, and the movements for independence were often justified through the use of theology. This justification represents another step on the road to a conscious liberation theology. During the same time, however, growing controversy occurred over the remarkable wealth accumulated by the

11 Ferm, x.
12 Hennelly, xvii.
13 Ibid, xvi.
14 Ferm, 5.
15 Hennelly, xvii.
Church. In fact, by the time the wars of independence occurred throughout Latin America, the Church was not only the largest landowner, but also was the most politically conservative force in the region.

Independence was gained throughout most of Latin America by the 20th century, but following this independence, the British, and later the United States, gained vast economic and political influence and began to further exploit the already struggling peoples. The independence the nations had gained was strictly political, and a neo-colonial relationship became evident, with Latin American countries severely dependent economically on both Great Britain and the United States.

During the 20th century, along with political independence, Latin American nations experienced enormous growth in population, from 63 million people in 1900 to 200 million by 1960. This population explosion only served to further amplify existing social problems. The population growth also meant that one-third of the world’s Catholics lived in Latin America by 1986, with predictions that the number will increase to 42% by the year 2025.

Despite the high numbers of Catholics, Latin America also had the lowest proportion of priests per population in the world. One church observer stated that, “Sometimes I am led to think that Jesus Christ did not initiate the sacraments of the Eucharist and of penance for the people of Latin America, for they simply do not have the opportunities to receive them.” The lack of priests was certainly not the only problem facing the people of Latin America when the world entered the 1980s.

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16 Ferm 5.
17 Lernoux, 10.
18 Ferm, 6.
19 Ferm, 6.
21 Ferm, 6.
By the 1980s, approximately 180 million people lived in poverty in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 80 million of those people lived in extreme poverty. Two-thirds of the population was undernourished or starving. Eighty percent of the wealth was held by only five percent of the population. The masses remained landless, with two-thirds of usable land possessed by only a handful of Latin Americans and mostly foreign multinational corporations. Unemployment rates were high, and people who managed to find work did so for nearly nothing. Education and medical attention were nearly nonexistent to the majority of people. Many countries were governed by military dictatorships, and citizens lived in almost unbearable conditions.

As these situations developed, the Catholic Church underwent a theological and liturgical revival. From the 1930s until the 1960s, its revival focused on religious orders and seminaries. At the culmination of this initial revival, in the conference of Latin American episcopacy (CELAM I) held in 1955 in Rio de Janeiro, issues such as the modern role of the church in missions and social order were addressed. During this conference, Cardinal Adeodate Piazza foreshadowed the coming of liberation theology, citing Jesus in a sermon in which he defined the true mission of the church: “The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor.”

Two conferences to follow CELAM I, Vatican II and the Medellin Conference of 1968 (CELAM II), are recognized as the events that provided the momentum for liberation theology’s scholarly emergence. Vatican II was convened by Pope John XXIII in 1962 and met for two months at a time for the next four years, and it “represent[ed] the positive response of the Catholic

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24 Ferm, 6.
Church to the challenges of the modern world.” Vatican II was the first time a “world church” existed and attendees, among them Peruvian Gustavo Gutiérrez known as the father and primary supporter of liberation theology, engaged in what Gutiérrez described a “critical reflection in the light of the word of God.” These reflections were placed into the Latin American context for the first time. At this meeting, the Church was redefined as the people of God on a pilgrimage, which was revolutionary change from its prior definition of the Pope being and representing the Church.

One document resulting from the council was the 1965 *Gaudium et Spes*, Latin for “Joy and Hope”, which highlighted the extraordinary duty Christians have toward “those who are poor or in any way afflicted” and emphasized the mandate that social necessities should be counted “among the primary duties of modern man.” The document explained that a greater distribution of economic power was important and “affirm[ed] that the church itself, although independent of the political sector, has the right – even the duty – to pass moral judgments on political matters.”

Latin America, because of the conditions that had generated since the Spanish conquest, had been ready to explode into massive social revolution, and, as the documents of Vatican II began to reach Latin American bishops, priests, and lay persons, they were able to “find confirmation of what they themselves had come to see as the role of the church in building a new social order.” With this confirmation, a new era started for the church and the people in Latin America; it was one where a realization was found that political and economic domination needed to be eliminated in order to bring the masses out of inconceivable poverty and injustice and where importance was placed on the “concern for the poor, resistance to the privileged few, distrust of the established

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26 Ferm, 7.
29 Ferm, 7.
30 Ibid, 10.
order, and protest against the prevailing structures of the social order.” 31 Until the convening of Vatican II, the Church of Latin America was a mirror Church pertaining to the ways in which it practiced and shared its theology. In the 1950’s and 1960’s, the Church gradually became a source Church and moved away from the more rigid theologies of Europe.

Gutiérrez stated that without Vatican II and Pope John XXIII, the Medellín conference and liberation theology’s beginnings would not have had the proper conditions and environment to emerge. 32 It was with this history of conquering, oppression, and poverty and in this religious atmosphere that liberation theology was born.

The Birth of Liberation Theology: What Does the Theology Contain?

In Medellín, Colombia in 1968, the General Conference of the Latin American episcopacy (CELAM II), or the Medellín conference convened with the central theme being “The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council.” 33 Many priests, bishops, and cardinals who attended and gained inspiration from Vatican II were also present at Medellín. Their goal was to define the role of the church in tackling the ever-important social and political problems prevalent in their own communities. It was here that they dove insightfully into the question of how to be a Church in the context of the poor and in a place where religion was imposed upon the people in their history. Similar to the conclusions at Vatican II, they determined that there should be a push, in Gutierrez’s words, to give “preference to the poorest and neediest, and to those who are segregated for any reason.” 34

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31 Ferm, 10.
32 Ibid, 7.
33 Ibid, 11.
34 Gutiérrez, ”Option for the Poor,” 27.
This conference is known as the “cradle of liberation theology”\textsuperscript{35} because it truly focused the attention of the bishops and lay people on the existing Latin American situation, and specifically upon human injustice and oppression. Gutiérrez marks 1968, the year of CELAM II, as the birth year of Latin American liberation theology as a self-conscious movement.\textsuperscript{36}

It is necessary to the understanding of liberation theology, however, to acknowledge that although Vatican II and Medellín were vital catalysts, they were not the primary producers or authors of liberation theology. Alfred T. Hennelly, a scholar of liberation theology, describes liberation theology as “one of the most astonishing and lasting phenomena in the Catholic Church during the second half of the twentieth century”\textsuperscript{37} precisely because its deepest insights came not from scholars in the Church or developed world, but from “small communities of the poorest and least literate men and women in Latin America.”\textsuperscript{38} It surfaced as a movement of the poor, giving them their long-missing voice. By looking from the experience of the oppressed, liberation theology works from the bottom up, seeing and experiencing the world from the “underside of history,”\textsuperscript{39} from the perspective of the poor and the suffering.

The methods that liberation theology utilizes to see the world from this perspective are defined by Clodovis Boff, a prominent figure in liberation theology, in three steps. It takes an inquisitive approach where one must see the world around him in the first step, judge what he sees in the second, and then act based on conclusions drawn from the judgments in the final step. These steps are described as three mediations: the socio-analytic, the hermeneutic, and the practical. In the socio-analytic mediation, one sees the world of the oppressed and, beginning with a level of

\textsuperscript{35} Ferm, 11.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 11-17.
\textsuperscript{37} Hennelly, xiii.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Hennelly, xvii.
suspicion, questions why things are the way they are and why. This is the natural and tangible,\textsuperscript{40} a commitment, and it begins with a person, the people. In the hermeneutic mediation, or the second act\textsuperscript{41} of the theology, one “contemplates the word of G-d,”\textsuperscript{42} and seeks to understand what G-d’s plan for the poor is through use of the Scriptures. Faith is the central keystone and point of departure of liberation theology\textsuperscript{43}, even though this faith and spirituality does not come first. The practical mediation is the action step, where one seeks to find the appropriate operations to overcome oppression, using knowledge discovered in both the socio-analytic and hermeneutic mediations\textsuperscript{44}. In this method, the theology begins with action and ends with action\textsuperscript{45}.

The word theology comes from the Greek word \textit{theologia}, which means “G-d-talk” or “discourse about G-d.” Theologies differ in how one encounters and understands G-d, and liberation theology differs in that it begins with action and ends in action. It is, however, both a continuation and a departure from modern Catholic theology. It does not create new content, but rather takes a new approach at doing theology. As a continuation of modern theology, it “represents a radical engagement of Christianity with the world, with the intent to represent human freedom and G-d’s gratuitous activity in the questions and issues of the day.”\textsuperscript{46} Liberation theology, like other theologies, includes discussion about G-d, the church, Jesus Christ, salvation, and sacraments.

Liberation theology departs from modern theology in that it creates a Christianity identified with the oppressed and suffering. It insists, unlike other theologies, that, as Brown stated, “all those topics must be planted in the firm soil of the earth, and that therefore many things that are

\textsuperscript{40} Clodovis Boff, "New Methodology of the Theology of Liberation." \textit{Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology}. By Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría. (London: SCM, 1996.), 5.

\textsuperscript{41} Ferm, 18

\textsuperscript{42} Boff, 11.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 3.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 11.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 20.

\textsuperscript{46} Hennelly xvii.
happening on that same earth have to be challenged, judged, overthrown…and replaced.”

It, in Hennelly’s words, represents “a freedom of transformation, and proclaims a G-d whose love frees us for justice and faith.” Boff explains that liberation theology “adopts on the level of liberation of the poor the great intuitions of the theology of the past.” In doing this, it brings old theologies “up to date by applying them to the series of problems faced by the oppressed.” Unlike traditional theology, which uses Western philosophy as its base, liberation theology employs “critical and liberating perspectives of the social sciences to identify the root causes of oppression and to reflect critically on acting to overcome this oppression in society.”

In order to create a Christianity identified with the suffering masses, Christianity is related to the everyday lives of the people. Liberation theology’s primary task is no longer to convince a nonbeliever of Christianity’s truths, but to liberate the oppressed. The central message of liberation is the good news to the poor of liberation from unjust social structures, the power of fate, and personal sin and guilt.

Two central themes of liberation theology are the “preferential option for the poor,” a phrase coined by Gutiérrez and associated with this theology, and G-d and Jesus as liberators. The phrase “preferential option for the poor” asserts that G-d loves all people and not just some. When one observes the world, as in the socio-analytic mediation of liberation theology, she finds that despite G-d’s love for all, as Gutiérrez stated, “the poor get a decidedly unfair share of the world’s goods (due chiefly to human greed), and the fact that G-d does love all means that there must be food, shelter, jobs, and humane living conditions for all and not just for some.” Therefore, it is

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47 Brown, 52.
48 Hennelly xvii.
49 Boff, 5.
50 Boff, 5.
52 Ferm, 17.
53 Brown, 63.
54 Brown, 32.
necessary to start with the poor in making changes to a just world. This preferential option is backed by liberation theologians through Scriptures, which illustrate G-d as the “G-d of the poor.”

Gutiérrez stated that with liberation theology and its “preferential option for the poor”:

Poor people can begin to have hope, for they are discovering that things do not have to remain the way they are. Change is possible. That has never been part of the life of the poor until recently. They thought that they were fated to remain just as they were. Indeed, it was the message of the church for hundreds of years that things would not change, and that one’s task on earth was simply to accept wherever one was on the social-economic scale as G-d’s will. But now the poor are discovering that it cannot be G-d’s will for most of G-d’s children to suffer. G-d wills life and love and fullness for all and not just a few. And G-d wants our help to bring that about.

In the second act of theology, the hermeneutic mediation, people come together to confront oppression and through the study of Scriptures strive to overcome the injustices of their realities and find new meaning in Jesus Christ. It is this concrete action and these studies that produce the true theology of liberation. It is imperative to understand who exactly is doing these actions. Who are those using their voices and being heard for the first time? They are those, who not long ago, were “absent from history,” and are now becoming “active agents” of their own histories.

These people, the masses, came together to form communities dedicated to this questioning and study called Base Christian Communities. These communities are responsive and active communities, helping to stimulate the growth and the spread of liberation theology. There are people in the communities who decided to come together and question their lives and the Church by applying the Bible to their realities. As they analyze their widespread experiences, they incorporate the word of G-d, his reactions to the poor, and Jesus’ death for sins to create a new voice, their voice, the voice of liberation theology. In the communities, the people learn to organize to work for

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55 Ibid, 33.
56 Ibid, 28.
58 Hennelly, xix.
their own social welfare including their economic well-being, health, and education. This concept of Base Christian Communities exemplifies the idea that single-handedly an oppressed people cannot turn to hope, but in a community, a difference can be made. Gutiérrez explains that in these communities that operated through creative means rather than drawing upon fear, which “silences tongues and paralyzes hands,” liberation theology and its authors focus on “faith and hope, cultivated with courage.” This, Gutiérrez continues, “loosen[s] tongues to protest the outrages of history and animate[s] hands to reshape that history.”  

These communities became the “major vehicle for the spread of liberation themes beyond academic circles.” At the start of the 1980s, there were over one hundred thousand Base Christian Communities throughout Latin America.  

It is also necessary to note here that although the people are considered the main authors and roots of liberation theology, without the pastoral and the professional levels of the movement, the messages would not have been spread and held as serious matters with such influence and lasting value. In this way, one can see the movement as a clock. The masses, the poor, act as the machinery that allow the clock to function at all, but they are hidden and unseen to the average onlooker. Because the machinery is functioning, the second hand is able to tick along the clock, which represents the pastoral level, including bishops, priests, and other lay people. Without that second hand, the minute and hour hands would have no reason or ability to move. These hands represent the professional level, the theologians, like Gustavo Gutiérrez, Jon Sobrino, and Clodovis and Leonardo Boff, who show in concise and strong language exactly what the message is on a public level, much like the hour and minute hands show the viewer the exact time. All of these

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59 Gutiérrez, Essential Writings, 2.
61 Ibid.
voices, all of these parts of the clock, are “custodians of the holy places.” They are keeping alive the stories and the memories that are holy and special to the movement’s future.

The key difference in the way that believers of liberation theology encounter G-d as they study and relate to Scriptures is that G-d becomes a liberator. The bible has two fundamental points in relation to G-d as a liberator: first the exodus from Egypt as G-d’s liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian oppression, and secondly, the coming of Jesus Christ, who sought to liberate all the poor from their oppression. In the Christian Scriptures, G-d became human for the sake of the people, and Jesus, as a liberator, struggled against the oppressors of his time. He spoke against the status quo of oppression and was martyred, only to later be resurrected. This resurrection shows that liberation is for all people because the resurrection of Jesus Christ was “G-d’s promise that justice will triumph.” There is also emphasis placed on the “biblical notion of the kingdom of G-d,” with a vision of societal existence marked by justice, peace, and loving collaboration. Jesus preached of this free gift, the Reign of G-d, and his commitment to poor. If G-d and Jesus are seen as liberators, then it follows that to know and encounter G-d is to promote justice as G-d did and to follow in the ways of Christ is to provide for and serve those in need as he did.

In essence, liberation theology is not just thought and reflection, but going a step beyond that and turning these reflections into action. It serves as a base for concrete and positive social change. Liberation theologians wished liberation theology to become a theology “that resists death and affirms life; one that renews our faith in a G-d of the poor and a G-d of life.” The theology urges for the creation of a world in which even the poor have the option for life before death, where

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63 Ferm, 20-21
64 Hennelly, xxi.
65 Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," 23.
66 Richards, 38.
people opt for life over death, and where humans are more human. This is a theology that strove to give a voice to those who previously were unable to be heard and liberates them from oppression. But has this different approach to theology been successful?

The Cases of El Salvador and Nicaragua

The civil war in El Salvador in the 1980s and the revolution and its aftermath in Nicaragua during the same time period serve as cases in the application of the innovative theology. Looking back, observers of these revolutions note that the emergence of liberation theology after Vatican II and the Medellin conference of 1968 and its “preferential option” on the side of the poor were in

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67 Sobrino, 233.
many ways what allowed the revolutions to occur with momentum\(^69\). By assisting the poor to realize that they deserved a more dignified lifestyle, and that they, like the Hebrew slaves, could experience liberation, a large following was created on the side of the revolutionaries.

![Photo 3. Map of El Salvador\(^70\)](image-url)

El Salvador, after it gained independence in 1823, was predominately ruled by a Liberal elite who viewed the masses as, if they were lucky, a source of labor, and if not, just a mass of people in the way. The elite received much of their profit from the production of indigo dyes, but when that demand was undercut by the creation of more cost-effective chemical dyes from Europe, they turned to the production of coffee. The Amerindians, whose ancestors had been relocated with the arrival of the Spanish, communally owned most of the arable land for the production of coffee. The Salvadoran elites seized this land from the Amerindians by unfair and often violent means, and

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this caused an extremely unequal pattern of land distribution. After this land seizure, “the fourteen families”, the coffee elite, controlled most of the country’s resources.71

In the 1930s, as the economic depression lowered the international demand for Salvadoran coffee, the elite moved to cut wages that were already low. This caused several uprisings against the Martinez dictatorship, the most significant being organized by Marxist intellectual Augustin Farabundo Martí. In this 1932 uprising, the government massacred 30,000 peasants.

After this uprising, government structure was altered to prevent further unrest; the elite “entrusted direct control of the government to an uninterrupted series of military regimes.”72 This led to a cycle of corruption and greater repression of the poor majorities. Several political groups, such as the Christian Democratic Party attempted to come to power to implement obviously needed reforms, but they failed and reformism faded.

By the 1960s, wages and living standards of the masses were deteriorating significantly, and most aid that entered the country was going toward the ruling military. From 1972 until 1979, despite the United States’ wish to block pressures for social revolution, for the first time since 1932, leftist rebel groups began to appear. The rebel groups grew in numbers, in large part, due to the activism of the Roman Catholic priests, nuns, and laypersons. They had become dedicated to social change in response to the Medellin conference’s calls for a “preferential option for the poor” and the importance of social justice. The teachings of liberation theology inspired people of the church to come together for these causes and to create action.

Hundreds of Christian Base Communities were implemented, and in these communities the gospel was studied and applied to the daily lives and oppression of the people. During this time, the Latin American Church also trained over fifteen thousand “delegates of the word,”73 whose mission

72 Ibid, 40.
73 Booth, 42.
was to bring the messages and discussions that occurred in the Christian Base Communities to the rural poor. These actions inspired by the teachings of liberation theology spread awareness of the “unjust nature of the Salvadoran political and economic system and spurred protests, peasant organization, and other forms of pressure for change.”\textsuperscript{74} Jesuit schools in San Salvador, which had predominately taught children of the elite, now took on the struggle for social justice.\textsuperscript{75} Many of the people motivated by the Christian Base Communities and the delegates of the word joined guerilla movements, the overarching group being the FMLN, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, named after the 1932 resistance organizer, Augustin Farabundo Martí. It was in this way that the spread of liberation theology’s ideas assisted in leading El Salvador to enter the explosive state that had been building over time, which would lead to the twelve year barbaric civil war in which more than 75,000 people would fall victim.

Most of these victims, as seen in Table 1 below, were peasants.\textsuperscript{76} Throughout the civil war, the military government also murdered numerous priests and liberation theologians who sided with the poor in their desire for justice. Accused of leftist sympathies, they were seen as a great threat. At one point, handbills were circulated with the message, “Be a Patriot, Kill a Priest.”\textsuperscript{77} Their sin was that they believed, as Brown stated, “that the church’s mission included political involvement; that the gospel had a special concern for the poor that must be translated into the actions and policies of a nation; that negotiated peace is preferable to an ongoing war; and that bishops often have to speak out and act in ways that are critical of the government.”\textsuperscript{78} Archbishop Oscar Romero was one of these accused and assassinated liberation theologians. Originally socially conservative, he was chosen to be the archbishop of San Salvador. After working with and among the people,

\textsuperscript{74} Booth, 42.
\textsuperscript{75} Sigmund, 109.
\textsuperscript{76} Booth, 197.
\textsuperscript{77} Sigmund, 112.
\textsuperscript{78} Brown, 7.
however, he saw the oppression and injustices that they experienced. During a sermon on September 23, 1979, Archbishop Romero stated:

I will not tire of declaring that if we really want an effective end to violence we must remove the violence that lies at the root of all violence: structural violence, social injustice, exclusion of citizens from the management of the country, repression. All this is what constitutes the primal cause, from which the rest flows naturally.79

Archbishop Romero’s recognition of these causes and the existing oppression was ultimately his death sentence. In El Salvador today, his face is seen in graffiti and murals throughout the country and is remembered as part of the continuing struggle for justice.

### Table 1. Deaths by Occupation: El Salvador.80

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Deaths (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workers</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peasants</td>
<td>67.9</td>
</tr>
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<td>2.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employees</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewives</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Total number of deaths from 1980-1984, which constitutes only the beginning of the civil war (1980-1992), was 50,219 people.81

At the war’s end in 1992, a United Nations peace agreement was signed; however, human rights infringements and killings continued to occur. The agreement “formally included most of the

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80 Booth, 197.
81 Ibid, 197.
basic reforms for which the FMLN had been fighting for more than a decade,” reforms both military and political. Elections were held in 1994, and the military establishment’s candidate won the presidency. The FMLN, however, became the second largest congressional party in 1994 and remained so in 1997. In 1997, they also won the mayoral race in the capital, San Salvador. In 2009, the FMLN’s candidate, Mauricio Funes, won the presidential race. This was seen by many of the impoverished throughout El Salvador as the victory they had been waiting for. But did that win really mean victory? Have the people been liberated? Does it matter if they haven’t been liberated in the sense that they have life’s necessities if they’ve been given great hope?

Today, in terms of poverty, education, and health, there is still a clear division between the elite and the poor majority. Driving through the capital, San Salvador, it is difficult to discern a difference between it and a United States’ suburb. A giant mall, fancy hotels, fashion, and more fast food than one could possibly know what to do with bombards visitors to the capital. However, a short bus ride away lies the reality of extreme poverty that continues to exist. For example, in the village of Nueva Esperanza, the people are tired. They are hungry. And they are frustrated with the government. Every year Nueva Esperanza floods with waters from a nearby dam that overflows. The government is unresponsive to their concerns, and it is widely recognized that they would rather have the villagers relocate because they are living on valuable land. This illustrates that even after nearly forty years, while some progress has occurred, not much has changed.

Nicaragua’s post-Independence history since 1821 is plagued by civil war, foreign interference, and dictatorships. With an abundance of natural resources, it has potential to be one of the richest countries in Central America, but, because of this history, Nicaraguans are among the poorest in Latin America. From the Liberal and Conservative civil war for control of the national

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82 Booth, 44.
government throughout the 19th century, to William Walker’s intervention on the side of the Liberals in 1855, to the United States occupation and conflict from 1912 to 1933 due to the possibility of a Nicaraguan inter-oceanic canal, one group of people was continually left out of the picture or purposefully used and oppressed: the Amerindians, the poor.

Like in El Salvador, in the 1870s, Nicaragua turned its market to one of predominately coffee exports. Again, like in El Salvador, the best lands for growing coffee were owned by Amerindians, who were also the best source of cheap labor. Land was taken through unjust legislations and violence. The poor could no longer be self-sufficient and had little choice but to work for masters and cheap wages on the land that was once theirs. Uprisings occurred but were violently shut down, often killing thousands of peasants at a time.

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83 Booth, 35.  
84 CIA - The World Factbook.
In 1927, Augusto C. Sandino led a movement to resist U.S. occupation in Nicaragua. The U.S. Marines failed to hinder the uprising, so they enlarged the Nicaraguan National Guard. This U.S.-sponsored National Guard later assisted Anastasia Somoza Garcia, its first Nicaraguan commander, in the creation of the Somoza family dictatorship. With U.S. support, the dictatorship held power from 1936 until 1979, brutalizing and oppressing its Nicaraguan citizens throughout the entire country.\(^85\)

Peasants continued to be pushed off their lands, and the only people to see benefits were the elite and Nicaraguan investors. The Somoza family’s riches, for example, increased from fifty million dollars in the 1950s to over five hundred million dollars by 1979. As they got richer, “the situation for the common citizen had become simply intolerable.”\(^86\)

In the 1960s and 70s, similar to the church’s role in El Salvador, priests and lay people established Base Christian Communities. In these communities, there was a “basic change in attitude from one of accepting the world as it is to one aiming at transforming it.”\(^87\) “Delegates of the word” were also trained in Nicaragua and sent to rural areas to introduce the ideas and beliefs of liberation theology to the oppressed poor. The discussions and reflections on the gospel in Nicaragua were generally focused more politically than those that occurred in El Salvador.\(^88\) As Fernando Cardenal, a Jesuit in Nicaragua, stated, “I don’t understand how you can read the Gospels and get spiritual lessons for your life out of it and not get involved in the Revolution.”\(^89\) The revolutionary movement, Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN/Sandinista National Liberation Front), founded in 1961, created strong alliances with the Christian community. Tension between the church and the state increased as the bishops spoke out against the government and

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\(^{85}\) Booth, 36.  
\(^{86}\) Booth, 38.  
\(^{87}\) Sigmund, 119.  
\(^{88}\) Sigmund, 119.  
\(^{89}\) Sigmund, 120.
their ways of terror. The bishops “spoke of Christ’s message as one of liberation and justice, and
viewed the present moment as a crucial opportunity to make concrete the preferential option for the poor.”

The environment of oppression and the enlightenment brought to the people through Base
Christian Communities led to the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship in 1979 by the FSLN. During the revolution, the FSLN stated that, “Christians have been an integral part of our
revolutionary history to a degree unprecedented in any other revolutionary movement in Latin
America.” The FSLN “experimented with social and economic reforms on behalf of the poor
majority” while they also attempted to lay the foundations for a democratic government. During
this time a counterrevolutionary movement emerged, supported by the U.S., which ultimately led to
the FSLN defeat in 1990 by U.S.-supported Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. Despite controlling
inflation and stabilizing the country after her victory, the GDP per capita in 1996 remained below
Nicaragua’s 1960 GDP per capita level.

Today Daniel Ortega, an original member of the revolutionary FSLN, is Nicaragua’s president. Although once a great hope to the country, he is now seen by a majority of people as
power hungry. There is also a fear that he may try to hold onto his corrupted presidency
indefinitely, and his rule has been equated to the long-lasting, corrupt Somoza dictatorship. The
people are still oppressed and ill represented. Have they been liberated?

This pattern of liberation theology’s assistance in revolutionary movements and civil wars to
very minimal benefit can be seen throughout Latin America. It is certainly possible to exaggerate

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90 Sigmund, 124.
91 Sigmund, 118.
92 Sigmund, 126.
93 Booth, 188.
94 Note: These assertions were made after experience living in impoverished villages among locals in
Nicaragua in the Spring of 2009.
the political influence that liberation theology had in these cases, but it is evident that it did influence the power of the revolutionary groups by giving the people a voice and the knowledge that they could make a difference and change the system for the better. In small countries such as Nicaragua and El Salvador, the “conversion of a relatively small group of students, intellectuals, and labor and peasant leaders” has potential to impact events and have “a significant influence on the future.” The realities that caused liberation theology to emerge were present in these countries. The ideas of liberation theology were shared with professors of universities in Managua and San Salvador at a time where it was clear that people were being oppressed. The professors and intellectuals recruited “many churchmen and churchwomen to the revolutionary struggle against Somoza in Nicaragua and against a repressive military in El Salvador.” In both cases cooperation with Marxism and Socialism was justified and violence was promoted. As we’ve seen in the cases of El Salvador and Nicaragua, however, after thousands of deaths of people motivated by liberation theology to make change, little change has actually come into fruition. What does that mean for liberation theology?

Has Liberation Theology Worked?

In 1990, the Catholic population in El Salvador was 97%, and in Nicaragua it was 95%. During the 1980s, many priests, bishops, and lay people turned to the teachings of liberation theology and espoused those teachings onto their congregants. This means that large percentages of the populations in both countries were exposed to the beliefs of liberation theology during this time period.

Nicaraguan liberation theologian, Ernesto Cardenal, stated:

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95 Sigmund, 133.
96 Sigmund, 133.
For their love for the kingdom of G-d, for the ardent desire that a just society be implanted, a real and concrete kingdom of G-d have on earth...Some day there will be no more war in Nicaragua...Instead there will be an abundance of schools, hospitals, and clinics for everyone, food adequate for everyone, art and entertainment. But most important there will be love among all.98

This future to come through liberation theology that Cardenal envisioned has not come to fruition even four decades after its emergence. Sister Peggy O’Neil, a Sister of Charity of Saint Elizabeth who has been living and working in El Salvador since 1986, stated that, “It’s wonderful we don’t have any more bullets or bombs, but we are not out of war. It is war of economics, a war of migration.”99 Struggles have not come to an end, and the ideal of liberation of the poor at the center of liberation theology has not been attained.

According to the CIA World Factbook, in 2005, 48% of the population in Nicaragua remained below the poverty line100, and in 2006, 30.7% of El Salvador’s population was below that line.101 As seen in Table 2 below, while El Salvador’s gross domestic product (GDP) per capita had increased fairly significantly since the start of their civil war in 1980 to 1996, Nicaragua’s GDP per capita in 1996 had fallen below their 1960 GDP.102 Unemployment trends, depicted in Table 3, at first glance, show significant signs of improvement. Nicaragua’s unemployment rates, 17.8% in 1980103, were only 5.9% in 2009.104 El Salvador’s rates are just as inspiring; 1980 with 24% unemployment105 and 2009 with only 7.2%.106 It is important, however, to look beyond the data. While these numbers do show signs of improvement, it does not automatically mean that the poor

98 Sigmund, 122.
99 Sr. Peggy O’Neil. "Sister Peggy O'Neil & Her Experiences with Liberation Theology in El Salvador." E-mail interview. 6 March 2010.
100 CIA – The World Factbook.
101 Ibid.
102 Booth, 188.
103 Ibid, 188.
104 CIA – The World Factbook.
105 Booth, 188.
106 CIA – The World Factbook.
have the necessities to survive. For example, in Nicaragua in 2008, underemployment reached
46.5% and El Salvador also had significant underemployment.\textsuperscript{107} Many people who are employed
in these countries are working in internationally owned factories and sweatshops in horrendous
conditions. In many cases, employees are not allowed to miss a day of work or they are fired. I
spoke with a woman in Guanacastillo, Nicaragua who explained that, when her mother passed
away, she could not even go to her funeral because she would be fired. Being fired means having
no income whatsoever, which means her family would have starved. This is the case for many
families in these two countries and throughout Latin America; they get paid minimal wages
working in hard conditions, but still remain unable to feed and provide for their children.

Table 2. GDP per Capita in 1986 U.S. Dollars\textsuperscript{108}
Data denoted by an asterisk are in current U.S. Dollars\textsuperscript{109}

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<th>GDP per Capita in 1986 U.S. Dollars</th>
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<td>Nicaragua</td>
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<td>2005</td>
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Table 3. Unemployment Trends in Percentages\textsuperscript{110}

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<th>Unemployment Trends in Percentages</th>
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<td>Nicaragua</td>
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<td>1984</td>
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<td>2009</td>
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Note: For Nicaragua, while this is official data, underemployment was 46.5% in 2008, and
remained high in 2009. In El Salvador, the data are also official rates, but their economy has much
underemployment as well.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} Booth, 188.
\textsuperscript{110} Booth, 188.
\textsuperscript{111} CIA – The World Factbook.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
It is also necessary to examine literacy and education rates to determine if liberation theology’s impact was strong and successful. In Table 4, shown below, one can see that in both cases, literacy rates increased dramatically between 1960 and 1995\(^{113}\), but seemed to reach an impasse after that point. Between 1995 and 2003, percentages of literacy have not increased by much, and it seems that those who have access are able to learn, while those without the access have simply remained in that state. Table 5 shows a decline in Nicaraguan enrollment in university between 1980 and 1995, however, in El Salvador, enrollment increased between those years.

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<th>Percent Literate(^{114})</th>
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<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
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<td>2003</td>
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Literate = age ten and over can read and write

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<tr>
<th>University Enrollment per 100,000 Population(^{117})</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
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<td>1995</td>
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It is clear from these data that social necessities, which as outlined at Vatican II in *Gaudium et Spes*, should be counted “among the primary duties of modern man”\(^{118}\) are not necessarily focuses of today’s society. The questions and challenges of liberation theology “came surging out of a real context of pressing problems. But in spite of the passage of time, this urgent context has not

\(^{113}\) Booth, 188.  
\(^{114}\) Booth, 188.  
\(^{115}\) CIA – The World Factbook.  
\(^{116}\) Ibid.  
\(^{117}\) Booth, 188.  
\(^{118}\) Gaudium et Spes, 243.
gone through a significant transformation.”¹¹⁹ Justice has not triumphed, and equity does not prevail.

There are multitudes of reasons why a movement whose goal is the liberation of a people would not be successful many decades after it appeared; this liberation, after all, is quite a large and daunting task. In the case of liberation theology there are several critiques and essential reasons that created a blockade to its success – turnoff by the phrase “preferential option for the poor,” the question of whose vision was really shared within the theology, the close relationship with Marxism, the justification of violence, and, because of these things, the shutdown by the Vatican.

The phrase “preferential option for the poor” is often misinterpreted, and it is due to this phrase that many in the developed world and in the Catholic Church are turned away from liberation theology. Many dislike the concept that the poor get a preferential option and the rest of the world get nothing. However, simply because there is a preferential option for the poor does not mean that there is not an option for those who have riches. Instead, this phrase shares that G-d loves all people, and not just some. As Archbishop Romero explained in a sermon on September 9, 1979:

> When we say “for the poor,” we do not take sides with one social class, please note. What we do…is invite all social classes, rich and poor without distinction, saying to everyone: Let us take seriously the cause of the poor as though it were our own.¹²⁰

Liberation theology was created with this emphasis on the poor and oppressed as its authors. As time progressed, however, many critics began to wonder whose opinions were really being shared. It was asked whether the liberation theologians, who usually differed significantly in class


¹²⁰ Romero, 162.
background than most of those in poverty that they represented, actually spoke for the majority of the poor or espoused their own ideas of an ideal society.\textsuperscript{121}

This question of authorship is also connected to the dialogue with Marxism found in many writings of liberation theology. Many liberation theologians saw the oppression of the people as a result of the exploitation of the rich, capitalist nations, and, in Marx’s writings, they found ways to analyze the current social divisions and a “ready explanation of the source of oppression”\textsuperscript{122} in a way that fit their theology. Marx wrote about a time when people existed happily in a simple state; this state was disrupted with the rise of economic classes, which marked the start of oppression and exploitation. To Marx, and later to liberation theologians, capitalism became the culprit that needed to be defeated.\textsuperscript{123}

Because of this connection, many liberation theologians often sided strictly with communism over capitalism. This polarization backed the theology into a box that ultimately gave the people fewer options in how they wished their liberation to occur. It also caused people to ask the wrong questions when it came to their liberation. In the late 1970s in El Salvador, for example, the Christian Democratic Party, who was often backed by a majority of the poor because of their reformist agenda, were disliked by liberation theologians because eliminating a capitalist economy was not their goal. This Marxism or nothing attitude and “infatuation with socialist revolution”\textsuperscript{124} ended up turning both congregants and the Vatican away and cut off any serious dialogue that could have occurred with anyone who did not share their political convictions.

In other words, while many liberation theologians and Catholic clergy were “preaching class-war, many of those on whose behalf the war was presumably being waged decided they

\textsuperscript{121} Sigmund, 147.
\textsuperscript{122} Sigmund, 177.
\textsuperscript{123} Rhodes.
\textsuperscript{124} Sigmund 177.
weren’t so interested in Marx or listening to a language of hate” over love. Many simply wanted to learn the ways of Jesus and his universal love. This was found for many in other religious communities, most notably Protestant communities. Instead of strictly being anticapitalism, liberation theologians and Catholic clergy would have been more successful if they had directed their attention to “promoting genuine participatory democracy that would to restrain the excesses of economic power, whether capitalist or socialist.” The fall of communism in 1991 left liberation theology with no working alternative to the capitalist method, which, to many, also served as the fall of liberation theology.

Although the relationship with Marxism has been one of the Vatican’s chief complaints, liberation theology and its theologians’ encouragement and justification of violence is one that receives much attention. Often times, in the Base Christian Communities, Catholic clergy promoted revolutionism and unveiled the desirability of violence and counterviolence in the pursuit of social justice and liberation. This justification of violence that some liberation theologians shared and the bloodshed it provoked caused many to have second thoughts on the nature of the theology. An observer stated that, "such a violent counterrevolution here and in other Latin American nations - along with the failure of Eastern European Marxism and the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua to bring social, political and economic justice - have led to calls for a new look at liberation theology.” In some cases, it seemed that the promotion of revolution to reach liberation took precedence over the promotion of education, democracy, and equality to all. In 1985, Bishop Hoyos, a leader of the conservative wing of the Catholic church in Latin American accused


126 Sigmund, 185
127 Rhodes.
liberation theologians of their violent promotions, stating, “When I see a church with a machine gun, I cannot see the crucified Christ in that church. We can never use hate as a system of change. The core of being a church is love.”128

A supporter of liberation theology stated that, “When one identifies with the interests of the poor, one will undoubtedly come into conflicts with the interests of other sectors of society, and their allies in the churches.”129 This has indeed been the case. Although liberation theology initially had support from the Vatican at Vatican II and the Medellin conference, its association with Marxism and its avocation of violence caused the Church to denounce it in its entirety, saying that it undermined both church authority and the meanings of Christianity. Beginning with Pope Paul VI, John XXIII’s successor, strong actions were made in order to hinder the work and ideas of liberation theology. Later, Pope John Paul II condemned and strove to permanently end the church’s relationship with liberation theology. Current Pope Benedict XVI has continued to vehemently condemn liberation theology and its authors because of its effects on the Catholic Church. In addressing the damage that had been done to the Church in his opinion, he stated that, “The more or less visible consequences of that approach – characterized by rebellion, division, dissent, offence and anarchy – still linger today, producing great suffering and a serious loss of vital energies in your diocesan communities.”130

While Latin American liberation theology and its theologians certainly had their flaws and the Latin American people have not been completely liberated in the way that liberation theologians and its followers had hoped, it would be unfair to not recognize the opportunities it unleashed, the advancements it was able to accomplish, and the push forward that it has given the cause for the poor majorities. It’s only fair for one to recall that when the Hebrew slaves were liberated from the

128 Ibid.
129 Hennelly, xiv.
130 Gregg.
tyranny of the Egyptian pharaoh, they, too, did not enter into a perfect world where they had all the necessities they needed to live. Just as they faced challenges and obstacles before reaching their Promised Land, so too do the Latin American people continue to have these obstacles toward complete liberation.

Liberation theology has survived since its initial emergence because of it “responded to deeply felt and widely accepted needs of the Latin American church”\(^\text{131}\) and gave the Latin American people a hope that had long been lost. Kathleen McBride, a Maryknoll Lay Missioner in 1976 in Latin America and follower of liberation theology stated that, “Liberation Theology has served as inspiration for liberation movements in Latin America. It helped to focus and clarify people’s commitment to social change.”\(^\text{132}\) Protestant Manfred Bahmann stated that, “Its call to renewal is still as valid as it was in 1968, and its work has barely begun.”\(^\text{133}\) It has also been able to change and adapt as circumstances in the region transformed.

Prior to Catholic liberation theology, it has been mainly Protestant Christianity that offered “a radical critique of social and economic structures.”\(^\text{134}\) Thus, it brought the reality of the oppressed and impoverished to the Catholic Church for the first time and tried to confront that reality. It, for the first time, committed the Latin American Catholic Church to “the defense of the poor and oppressed, reasserted the biblical critique of the wealthy, promoted reflection on the Bible at a local level, and gave a sense of dignity, self-respect, and efficaciousness to thousands of the poor and marginalized in Latin America.”\(^\text{135}\) It also provided encouragement for grass-roots community action and pushed for policies that were on the side of the poor.\(^\text{136}\) Latin Americans

\(^{131}\) Sigmund, 176.
\(^{132}\) Kathleen McBride. “Kathy’s Experiences and Opinions on Liberation Theology.” E-mail interview. 8 March 2010.
\(^{133}\) Bahmann, 59.
\(^{134}\) Sigmund, 196.
\(^{135}\) Sigmund, 195.
\(^{136}\) Sigmund, 195.
were not only able to begin to understand their lives and destinies in relation to the bible, but they also received a renewed sense of Christianity. Perhaps most importantly, it provided an opportunity for the poor to voice their own freedoms, their own wants, and to “be heard clearly and loudly in every corner of the planet.”

Central to liberation theology is the reality of suffering and struggles and because it came from these real and tangible problems, the flames of theologies of liberation have not been extinguished, but need to emerge in different forms, asking different questions, while remaining more open to dialogue.

**What Does That Leave for the Future of Liberation Theology?**

Liberation theologians still see Latin America and the world as “more characterized by conflict than compromise, inequality rather than equality, oppression rather than liberation.”

Thus, there is more work to be done, and changes in the theology need to be made if it is going to continue to survive. Some changes have already occurred. For instance, because it became apparent that socialism as implemented in Eastern Europe was not an ideal alternative to capitalism after communism’s fall in 1991, there has been widespread recognition among liberation theologians that “the poor are not going to be liberated by cataclysmic political transformations, but by organizational and personal activities in Base Communities.” In other words, they now focus greater energies on issues of faith and personal spirituality, and less on social structures and politics. A scholar of liberation theology stated that, "the greater emphasis [is] on the spiritual sources and implications of the concept of liberation." Liberation theologians and clergy also are no longer easily justifying the use of violence and revolution. With these changes and other changes that are

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137 Hennelly, xvii.
138 Sigmund, 181.
139 Sigmund, 177.
140 Rhodes.
sure to come as the political and economic environments evolve, liberation theology still has the potential to “exercise a radical “prophetic” role in reminding complacent elites of the religious obligation of social solidarity, and in combating oppression and promoting the empowerment of the poor.”

An important change in the religious makeup of Latin America has occurred during the period of strong influence of Catholic liberation theology: the great decline of the Catholic population throughout the region. Many people have moved away from the Catholic Church and toward the Protestant church, the majority being Pentecostal. These changes can be seen in Table 6 below. The first Pentecostal churches came to Chile, Brazil, and Mexico in the early 1900s, and since then the movement has spread like wildfire throughout the entire continent. Since the 1960s, the number of Protestants has increased from 15 million to about 40 million. Many place the blame for this shift on liberation theology. A saying in Latin America is as follows: “The Church opted for the poor, and the poor opted for the Pentecostals.” Pentecostal churches were often less political and focused more upon spirituality and Jesus’ love. To many, liberation theology tended to overlook “emotional, personal message most people seek from religion. At the simplest level, liberation theologians preached salvation through social change - meaning, in effect, socialism in one form or another. The evangelicals preach individual salvation through individual change.” As Pentecostalism begins to spread among the still impoverished and unliberated majorities, the responsibility to vouch for the poor for a sort of liberation may fall into the

141 Sigmund, 196.
142 Bahmann, 60.
143 Rhodes.
144 Gregg.
145 Rhodes.
Protestant church’s realm, or perhaps churches will join forces in order provide a reasonable “preferential option for the poor.”

Table 6. Religious Affiliation by Country in 1990 and 2005

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<td>Venezuela</td>
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"Percentages in parentheses are derived from the 1990 CIA Factbook. Percentages without parentheses are derived from the 2005 CIA Factbook. Present = a sizeable population but not quantifiable."

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146 Penyak, xxii – xxiii.
Conclusion

Two-thirds of the world continue to live in a reality of poverty and underdevelopment, which began with the conquering and colonization of entire continents. Relationships of exploitation and oppression continue today despite political independence through neo-colonial economic relationships. In Latin America, a unique scenario played out because it was the only region in the world where the majority of the poor were Catholic. With this reality of poverty and the changing context of the Church toward a source Church generating its own ideas and theology siding with the poor and marginalized, liberation theology emerged. The theology is one whose goal is to liberate the oppressed rather than to prove the truth of Christianity to nonbelievers. It focuses on giving a “preferential option for the poor” and illustrates Jesus Christ and G-d as liberators. It is a theology of action. Bishops, priests and lay persons grasped onto these ideas and spread them amongst their congregants and within Base Christian Communities, where ordinary people worshiped and reflected on Scriptures with the aim of influencing human rights and social justice.

Despite its four decades of development and existence, however, the oppressed peoples of Latin America continue to struggle. They have not been liberated. For example, as seen through the cases detailed above, many in El Salvador and Nicaragua remain in poverty and social injustices still exist. Nearly half of Nicaragua’s population and one-third of El Salvador’s live their lives below the poverty line. Society has failed to provide social necessities to all, which liberation theologians view as our primary duty.

Liberation theology failed to liberate because, ultimately, it asked the wrong questions. It focused too much on Marxism and violence, and not enough on equality and spiritual matters. It is unrealistic to expect a worldwide capitalist system to collapse or change dramatically, and therefore, questions needed to be asked within that context; they needed to ask questions of how to work with
and within the existing system to create positive changes. Further examination of the story of exodus used as a narrative for liberation theology is quite interesting and reveals further insights on its failure. While the Hebrews eventually found freedom after forty years of struggling in the desert, which, ironically, is about the same amount of time liberation theology has existed as a movement, upon their arrival they displaced inhabitants that already lived in the area. The results of this displacement can still be seen in Middle East conflicts today. This may be a major downfall of the way liberation theology goes about its liberation: in order for one group to be liberated, another must fall.

Again, it must be reiterated that liberation theology has not been a complete failure in the scheme of things, and it does have a place in the years to come, although it may no longer be a predominantly Catholic movement in the Latin American region. Liberation theology responded to the real needs of the people and provided a reason to have hope and a source of inspiration. It encouraged community action for the first time and offered an opportunity to voice opinions and needs. Perhaps most importantly, it was the first time that the Catholic Church took on these real issues in any form. Despite the Vatican’s disapproval, it opened the Church up to a group of people who were beginning to think that Jesus and Christianity were not actually meant for them.

Philip Berryman, a priest in Panama from 1965-73 and a Central American representative for the American Friends Service Committee from 1976-80, offers an analogy reflecting the permanence of liberation theology despite the Vatican’s pressures against it:

Women in the Catholic Church are demanding an end to male monopoly on power and authority. Their demand for equality is expressed in the movement for access to ordination to the priesthood…There is now something of a scholarly consensus that there is no legitimate scriptural or theological reason for excluding women from ordination. The Vatican and the bishops, while making occasional statements about the role of women in the Church, have steadfastly refused to consider ordination. The issue will not go away, however, for the fact is that over half of the Church is made up of
women. Indeed, women do considerably more than half of the Church’s everyday work.147

Like this issue of women becoming ordained in the Catholic Church, the poverty that exists in Latin America is not just going to go away. The Vatican can make “statements and take disciplinary actions, but not even the pope can decree away”148 the poverty that the majority of Latin Americans experience. Therefore, the real issues that liberation theology raises will also not dissipate. The realities that allowed for the creation of liberation theology remain the same in the present day, and liberation theology, if it evolves, can continue the struggle to unshackle the exploited individuals who yearn for freedom and crave inspirational sustenance. The movement remains vital, and liberation theology is still finding its place in Latin American society.

Liberation theology must continue to evolve and truly listen to the voices of the poor majorities. Liberation from oppression and social injustices is possible, but it takes time and effort. As McBride stated, “‘Liberating the masses,’ in my mind, equates liberating all people from the different forms of oppression which requires many years, perhaps centuries to fulfill its goal.”149 Although it failed to succeed coming out of the revolutions and wars of Latin America, it created a push forward and a concern for the poor that wouldn’t have occurred otherwise. A lot has been learned from liberation theology, and it is likely that Marxism’s influence will continue to decrease, spirituality will become of greater focus and importance, and Protestant communities will continue to grow. There has to be a first step, and of course there will be many backwards steps. Liberation theology had its first go, its first step, and now it’s up to this generation to continue the “option for the poor” that emerged in 1968 in Medellin, Colombia.

147 Berryman, 204.
148 Berryman, 204.
149 McBride.
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