

APPENDIX

# The Present and Future of Latin American Liberation Theology: a Manifesto in Eight Parts

## 1 Latin American Liberation Theology's Past

At its best, in its pursuit of a *material* and *social* liberation for the non-person, liberation theology had two interrelated parts, one directed toward the Christian tradition, the other directed toward society. The former included a rereading of Christianity from history's underside. This had three elements: first, the notion of God as a God of concrete bodily life; second, a unified anthropology that made the body the locus of salvation and thus food, drink and shelter part of God's plan for all people; and third, a unified understanding of history in which the history of salvation is the very heart of human history. These elements formed the theological background for concepts such as the 'preferential option for the poor' and 'liberation'. The latter part included the use of the social sciences; liberation theologians incorporated economics, political science and sociology as intrinsic elements in the theological enterprise. They did so for two reasons, one critical and one constructive. First, liberation theologians sought to better understand the causes of oppression. If the goal is liberation, then there is a need to discover the underlying causes of oppression. Second, to develop 'historical projects' to achieve liberation. If the goal is liberation, then there is a need to develop models of political and economic organization that could contribute effectively to that cause. These elements, the rereading of Christianity, the critical and constructive use of the social sciences, worked together in the pursuit of liberation.

## 2 Latin American Liberation Theology's Present

Today, liberation theology has abandoned the construction of historical projects. This central element of early liberation theology – indeed, the element which, according to liberation theologians themselves, made their theology distinctive and different from North Atlantic theology – lies forgotten, a mere historical curiosity. Yet the development of historical projects remains central to liberation theology for two reasons. First and foremost, it is at this level that liberation is most truly pursued. Liberation is not abstract, it is social and material. Second, without historical projects liberation theology's terminology remains vacuous. It is through

the development of such projects that liberation theology gives specific content to its theological terminology; it is not clear what 'liberation' and the 'preferential option for the poor' mean in the absence of historical projects: witness that even the IMF uses this terminology. The upshot is a theology powerless to define and pursue its own ideals, a domesticated theology that talks about liberation rather than concretely pursuing liberation where it matters most to most people – in the economic and political structure of society.

## 3 The Causes of Latin American Liberation Theology's Present

There are three main causes at the root of liberation theology's domestication. One cause is the shift in context emblemized by the fall of the Berlin Wall. This cause is inescapable; the other two, however, are not. The second lies in the way liberation theology has come to understand its status as theology. Once attacked for being a pseudo-politics, liberation theology now stresses its proper theological nature by focusing on Scripture and tradition as its privileged sources. The construction of historical projects is thus pushed out of theology proper; it becomes an afterthought to the orthodox theological enterprise. Indeed, what is not part of theology cannot be asked of the theologian. The third cause is the way liberation theology has chosen to theorize capitalism. Capitalism is seen as an abstract, monolithic and all-encompassing entity that must be overcome wholesale. It is a monster that cannot be defeated, only heroically resisted. The upshot is that alternative forms of economic organization seem perpetually out of reach.

## 4 Latin American Liberation Theology and North American Liberation Theologies

The various North American liberation theologies share an inability to place real material liberation at the forefront of their task. They say they do, but they do not. In fact, they cannot. North American liberation theologies have made a middle class-focused identity politics their rallying cry. This is done in four ways: First, by emphasizing sources that safeguard theological orthodoxy and particular identities (Scripture, Black or Latina culture, the Black or Latino church, and so on); second, by excluding disciplines like political economy and legal theory from their theological sources; third, by failing to see that the benefits of a program of 'naming' or voice giving will benefit only the already well-to-do middle class unless tied to a wider program of social reconstruction.; finally, by failing to see that to develop such a program one must give at least the same emphasis to the construction of historical projects that one does to the preservation of theological and identity purity. The right question is not, what makes theology Black? Or what makes theology Latino? The right question remains, what will make theology liberative to the materially poor?

## 5 Latin American Liberation Theology and Modern Philosophy/Theology

Liberation theology provincializes North Atlantic philosophy and theology not merely to make room for a new theology, but to help make room for alternative models of political and economic organization. The demotion of North Atlantic philosophy and theology to one school among many is not about books or currents of thought, it is to do with helping the majority of humankind have a better life. Seeing North Atlantic philosophy and theology as pinnacles of global culture feeds into the belief that the societies that produce this culture have reached the highest modes of political and economic organization. If the Enlightenment is the release from immaturity, then Europe is the first mature region of the world. Today the United States would carry that mantle with Europe – the rest of us must watch, learn and emulate, until caught up. Thus presidential democracy as in the United States and parliamentary democracy as in Europe become models for the rest of the world, and capitalism as practiced in the United States and Europe become the end goal for societies not yet fully developed. Within this worldview other regions of the globe are condemned to walk a beaten path that has the North Atlantic models as their final destination. We are unable to pave a path or reach a destination of our own – our alternatives are blocked.

## 6 The Liberation Theologian, the Community and Historical Projects

It is a mistake to think that historical projects can emerge only from the grassroots and that the theologian must wait until they so emerge. This assumes that there is a divide between the theologian and the community with which he or she identifies; the theologian reads theologically a historical project that emerges first from the community. Instead, this divide must be rejected and overcome. The theologian must be seen as an integral part of the community and thus through his or her work may contribute to the possible emergence of historical projects within a neighborhood, a region, a nation, and even the globe. In the same way that the theologian learns from the encounter with a community, so too the community can learn from the visions the theologian develops through multiple sources. In the final analysis, it is not the theologian as theologian that carries out a potential historical project, it is the community and thus also the theologian as part of the community that makes change happen.

## 7 Liberation Theologies, Theological Education and the Theological Profession

Theologians today are unprepared to tackle the challenge posed by the non-person. They are unprepared because theological education is geared toward the

preservation of Christian identity and thus discourages the interdisciplinary work needed to train a budding liberation theology. Of course, future liberation theologians need to be aware of their rich theological heritage, but they must also receive training in disciplines such as comparative political economy, social theory and legal theory. They must learn to use these tools if there is to be any hope of placing liberation at the forefront of the theological task. However, there is a further problem. The professional practice of the theologian also discourages interdisciplinary work. This is so because theology suffers from lack of self-confidence. Within the academy, theology is often seen as not truly 'academic', as not truly rigorous. This attack has forced the theologian to retrench and focus more minutely on traditional theological concerns. As long as the concerns are traditionally theological, the theologian feels safe from outside criticism, master of his or her territory. The theologian who ventures outward, however, is ostracized on both fronts. Non-theologians see him as a dilettante, while theologians are afraid that his foolishness will reveal the foolishness of the profession as a whole. Any theologian who leans too heavily on disciplines deemed non-theological becomes a threat to the survival of the profession. His work is then judged as non-theological and he becomes an outcast.

## 8 The Way Forward

The time for liberation theology to reinvent itself is now. This reinvention requires three elements. First, liberation theology must be wrested from the stranglehold of church and academy. Both church and academy domesticate it by constraining liberation theology within a limited and 'proper' definition of theology. Only by releasing itself from this stranglehold can liberation theology's necessarily interdisciplinary nature come forth. Second, liberation theology must recover politics on a grand scale and see identity politics as part of a larger project of social, political and economic reconstruction. At best, identity politics without such a project serves the inclusion of minority middle-class groups into mainstream society; at worst, it degenerates into a quarrel among academics. Third, liberation theology must cease thinking of capitalism as a monolithic whole. As long as it continues to do so, avenues for change are blocked and liberation theology remains nailed to a capitalist cross. Instead, liberation theology must theorize political and economic systems as partial, incomplete and open to piece-by-piece change. These are the building blocks for a 21st century liberation theology. Let us start now. There is no better time to work for the future than the present.