

BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Unexplained Revolutions: The Origins and Ends of Latin American Catholic Upheaval

Jennifer Scheper Hughes

University of California, Riverside

John T. McGreevy's chronicle of modern Roman Catholic history is a vivid and sometimes jarring reminder of the historical depth of contemporary divisions within the Church, especially as these enter the public sphere. *Catholicism: A Global History from the French Revolution to Pope Francis* elucidates the church's ambivalent response to the challenge of modernity over the long nineteenth and twentieth centuries, specifically the rise of democratic nation states, anti-colonialist movements from the global south, the struggles of poor and working people for liberation, and feminist and human rights movements. The spread of totalitarianism and the supposed triumph of capitalism represented a different set of challenges for the church in this period.

In answer to radical social upheaval, the church pursued two conflicting and contradictory paths. On the one hand, church authorities assumed a defensive posture toward modernity, which they perceived as threatening the power and prominence of Roman Catholic institutions. The church moved to re-entrench conservative theologies and institutions and to reassert papal authority, a process underscored and intensified by new iterations of orthodox theology: ultramontanist and neo-Thomist. Neo-Thomists opposed human rights discourse and movements (262), and ultramontanists leveraged Catholic support for fascist regimes. On the other hand, a potent, perhaps unprecedented, openness to renovation erupted from within the magisterium, beyond what might have been required for the purpose of institutional survival alone. Progressive Catholics advocated for the centrality of the laity. Moved by the gospel's clarion call to justice, they strived to be responsive to the urgent situation of the global poor. Catholic personalist philosophies (from Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier) avoided the theological pitfalls of modern individualism and the problem (for the church) of individual conscience by centering the human person, now understood as embedded within complex social structures.

I am particularly interested in McGreevy's treatment of how these struggles played out in the Latin American context. In the two centuries under consideration, Latin American Catholics fought for and won political independence from European imperial regimes, forged new nations, launched and institutionalized revolutions, and continued to struggle and suffer under the violent legacies of colonialism including poverty, extractive economies, and militarism. Latin America is also critical for the period of McGreevy's study because it was the epicenter of the most significant Catholic theological movement of the twentieth century, Liberation Theology, the focus of one of the book's chapters. In my work, I explore the lived religion of Latin American Catholics, especially in Indigenous and Indigenous-descended communities. The questions I pose to McGreevy's text concern how the experiences, beliefs, and practices of

historically disenfranchised lay people, those reckoning with the aftermath of colonialism, might further contextualize and illuminate the conflicts of this period.

In some ways McGreevy's book presents a traditional ecclesial history: he does not set out to write a peoples' history (a "history from below") of Catholicism. The principal historical actors and agents are priests, bishops, theologians, and popes, although prominent lay Catholics, and some women, occasionally figure. The central conflicts are ideological, or intellectual, although carefully contextualized in relation to key historical events and trajectories. Because the perspective and pressing realities of masses of lay Catholics globally (today over one billion) are not consistently considered, some of the conflicts and transformations in the church are not fully explained in McGreevy's telling.

This is the case in recounting the significant transformative power of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the subject of McGreevy's most illuminating and immersive chapter. The very first vote at the Council concerned liturgical reform. Before the Council Fathers was a proposal to modernize the Catholic mass. The proposal passed by an overwhelming majority: 1,992 of 2,118 supported reform, an "outcome that revealed a massive, unexpected constituency for reform" (283). After the conclusion of the council, Pope Paul VI observed with some disquiet that "no one had predicted the 'acute and complex internal revolution' occurring inside the church." (342) Even with historical hindsight, the preceding chapters of McGreevy's history do not fully clarify the origins and sources of the Vatican II revolution. From my vantage, the answer to Pope Paul's disquiet surely lies in the history of lay Catholics in this period—in upheavals at local, diocesan, and national levels. In the global history of Catholicism, ecclesial leaders have often had to yield to, or been propelled forward by, grassroots movements of the laity that do not typically register in ecclesial histories. The hunger for change that the bishops' manifested at the Council arose from their more intimate familiarity with, and responsiveness to, the situation and struggles of ordinary Catholics back home. It is not that McGreevy overlooks this; indeed, the book's chapters are organized around key social movements (e.g., "decolonization") that might be seen as external to the church, movements fomented among the laity. Rather, in a work of this scope, it is difficult to capture the specificity and urgency of how global movements emerge from and play out upon local contexts.

We can see this, for example, in the chapter on liberation. With its focus on priests, bishops, and theologians, the irruption of Latin American Liberation Theology after the Second Vatican Council is not fully explicated. Liberation theology was, as McGreevy describes it, a powerful intellectual movement, one that shifted the locus of Catholic theological production from Europe to the global South. McGreevy sharply articulates liberation theologians' primary commitment to emancipation of the poor from oppressive economic systems (314), and their rapprochement with Marxism. The chapter describes and frames Pope John Paul II's apprehensions about leftist influence on the Latin American church and the tensions that emerged between Rome and the Council of Latin American Bishops (CELAM).

But Liberation theology was not primarily an intellectual or ideological movement, the purview of professional theologians and luminary bishops. Nor were the stakes most importantly theological. Across the continent, the theology of liberation was a grassroots Catholic struggle for human survival and hope, emergent from acute social and political crises and deeply attuned to the anguish of oppressed impoverished masses of Latin American Catholics. Its ambitions for justice were not limited to the political and economic spheres: it also had liturgical, spiritual, and affective dimensions.

The Peruvian founder of the field, Gustavo Gutiérrez, addresses his theology to the masses of Latin American Catholics who he comprehends as “nonpersons,” an extension of personalist theology. He writes, “the interlocuter of the theology of liberation is the “nonperson,” the human being who is not considered human by the present social order—the exploited classes, marginalized ethnic groups, and despised cultures” (*The Power of the Poor in History*, 193). In the Salvadoran Civil War, which some scholars and activists consider a genocide, as many as 75,000 civilians were killed by military forces. The Atlácatl Battalion, a US-trained, private military force in El Salvador, assassinated the liberationist Archbishop Oscar Romero. It was also responsible for the single most violent episode of the war, the massacre at El Mozote, in which some eight hundred lay people, mostly youth and children, were killed.

This brings me to my second intervention – that is, to address more specifically the suppression and dismantling of the theology of liberation movement by the church magisterium, one of the most significant church struggles of the century. This process included the censoring and silencing of its theologians, the replacing of liberationist bishops with conservative ones, the closing of its seminaries and lay training and empowerment programs, the marginalization of liberationist priests within diocesan structures, and the defunding of the apparatus of theological production (journals, presses, and publications). In the summer and fall of 1989, on the eve of Brazil’s first democratic elections in over twenty years, I spent the better part of a year in northeast Brazil researching the relationship between the Worker’s Party (PT) and the Liberation Theology Base Community movement (I was an undergraduate at the time). I attended workshops and seminars sponsored by the regional Catholic seminary, the Instituto Teológico de Recife (Theological Institute of Recife, or ITER), founded by Don Helder Câmara while he was Archbishop of Olinda and Recife (1964–1985). In 1985, just as the Brazilian military dictatorship was ending, Rome began intensifying its crackdown on the liberationist church. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger had just issued his “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’ (1984)” a systematic criticism of what he perceived to be the errors and excesses of liberation theology – which Ratzinger identified as an emphasis on social sin above individual sin; the borrowing of some aspects of Marxist analysis; and liberation theology’s commitment to build and strengthen the “Church of the Poor,” a notion that Ratzinger took to be a direct criticism of the authority and power of Rome and its cardinals. In 1985, the same year that the Brazilian liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, was silenced, Cardinal Ratzinger forced Câmara into retirement, replacing him with the conservative, José Cardoso. In October 1989, Ratzinger and Cardoso ordered the closing of ITER and several other liberationist regional seminaries. The cardinal had deemed these seminaries theologically suspect and politically dangerous. In response, several hundred students, lay leaders, and peasants from throughout the impoverished, drought-ridden state gathered in protest. I found myself there among them. Outside of the locked doors of the seminary, the protesters gathered to fast, sing, and pray for a reversal of the decision to close—a reversal that never came.

In the last chapters of McGreevy’s book, we find both Pope John Paul II and Ratzinger expressing a sort of subdued relief, accepting the apparent triumph of capitalism over communism. In 1992, John Paul II “proclaimed an era’s end.” With the decline of liberation theology, he was free to turn his attentions from Latin America to Eastern Europe. Ratzinger similarly felt it was “time to close the liberation theology chapter. The collapse of communism, he wrote, ‘turned out to be a kind of twilight of the Gods for that theology’ (370). Two things strike me here. First, I observe the strange

confluence of Ratzinger and John Paul II's views with philosopher Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" argument regarding the triumph of neo-liberal capitalism as the "final form of human government" and "the end of history's ideological evolution": a decidedly un-Catholic, anti-theological, view of human history. Second, I observe that the church magisterium was not just responding to these historic events but shaping them. If the historical and ideological struggle between capitalism and communism had finally been resolved, it was at least partly because the church itself participated in ensuring the success of capitalist democracies and stifled dissent, including in its own ranks. Liberation Theology presented one of the most powerfully articulated objections to the global expansion of neo-liberal capitalism, and Ratzinger and John Paul II were systematic in their efforts to extinguish the power of that vision.

The living memory of Vatican II is surely failing, as McGreevy observes in the conclusion of his text, and few of the original liberation theologians remain with us. But as historians of the *longue durée* know the outcomes and historical significance of these upheavals in the church are still unfolding. History is not over.

Reference

Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *The Power of the Poor in History, Selected Essays.* Trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books).

Cite this article: Scheper Hughes, Jennifer. "Unexplained Revolutions: The Origins and Ends of Latin American Catholic Upheaval." *Church History* 92, no. 4 (December 2023): 916–919. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640723002858>.