

# LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGION AND POLITICS

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*DEMOCRATIC ORGANIZATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: LATIN AMERICAN BASE COMMUNITIES AND LITERACY CAMPAIGNS.* By Johannes P. Van Vugt. (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1991. Pp. 169. \$45.00 cloth.)

*FROM CONQUEST TO STRUGGLE: JESUS OF NAZARETH IN LATIN AMERICA.* By David Batstone. (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1991. Pp. 224. \$14.95 paper.)

*RELIGION AND POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA: LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY.* By Edward A. Lynch. (New York: Praeger, 1991. Pp. 200. \$42.95 cloth.)

*BORN OF THE POOR: THE LATIN AMERICAN CHURCH SINCE MEDELLIN.* Edited by Edward L. Cleary. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990. Pp. 210. \$23.95 cloth.)

*DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT IN LATIN AMERICA: ECONOMICS, POLITICS AND RELIGION IN THE POST-WAR PERIOD.* By David Lehmann. (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1990. Pp. 235. \$44.95 cloth.)

*CHURCH AND POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA.* Edited by Dermot Keogh. (New York: St. Martin's, 1990. Pp. 430. \$35.00 cloth.)

The impact of Vatican II, held in 1965, was never greater in Latin America than during the late 1960s and 1970s, when important sectors within the Catholic Church began to reach out to the poor through *comunidades eclesiales de base* (base Christian communities, or CEBs) and the espousal of liberation theology. These six volumes (all published within a year of one another) assess social, economic, and political changes associated with these diverse yet related social and intellectual movements as well as their impact on selected Latin American countries.

Not all Latin American nations receive equal coverage, and some receive little at all. For example, most contributors touch on the Brazilian situation, but none of these authors deal extensively with the situations in Ecuador or Uruguay. The reasons underlying this apparent neglect are themselves a subject for further critical analysis and debate.

Johannes P. Van Vugt's *Democratic Organization for Social Change:*

*Latin American Christian Base Communities and Literacy Campaigns* draws on primary research in Nicaragua during 1965 as well as on a vast secondary literature. The author seeks to formulate what he terms “a descriptive model” of the CEB movement in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Brazil. Van Vugt compares the actual workings of these organizations with their stated goals. Not surprisingly, he finds these CEBs falling short of their goals on a number of levels. His study indicates that basic discrepancies between stated ideals and results observed did not arise as a consequence of local actions or inaction but were introduced from outside by members of the church hierarchy representing a conservative religious backlash to the agenda proposed by Vatican II. Whenever church agents attempted to “empower” the poor through liberationist techniques such as *concientización* (consciousness-raising), they found themselves in direct conflict with dominant members of the religious hierarchy. Corrupt military dictatorships and inefficient government planners also hampered the potential effectiveness of CEBs. Often, foreign missionaries were forced to choose among their own liberal sentiments, the wishes of the church hierarchy, and the goals of governmental agencies. Van Vugt asserts that in order to remain viable, many missionaries ended up siding with corrupt officials and the church hierarchy.

Despite Van Vugt’s intensive first-hand experience in the region, *Democratic Organization for Social Change* constitutes a better macro-study than a micro-study. Van Vugt states at the outset that his intention was to focus on the local level, but his analysis is more satisfactory in considering the macro-level forces working against CEBs themselves. At times, his prose gets mired in jargon, and obvious theses are stated in a roundabout way. Although his hypotheses are probably sustainable, the appropriate supporting evidence is not well marshalled. Much of Van Vugt’s data on local-level struggles in Nicaragua is anecdotal. Subsequent chapters that examine church- and state-sponsored literacy campaigns in Brazil (from 1961 to 1964) and Sandinista Nicaragua (in 1980) are more successful in establishing major trends, but they do little to explicate events and their significance at the local level.

David Batstone’s *From Conquest to Struggle: Jesus of Nazareth in Latin America* evidences a sympathetic, albeit sometimes critical, exposition of aspects of liberation theology relating to Christ. The founder of CAMP (Central American Mission Partners), Batstone analyzes well-known works by some of liberation theology’s major proponents—including Gustavo Gutiérrez, Severino Croatto, Segundo Galilea, Clodovis Boff, and Jon Sobrino—paying particular attention to their respective views on the mission and life of the historical Jesus.<sup>1</sup> The questions Batstone poses are

1. For discussions of these and other thinkers, see Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1987); and *Conflict and Competition: The Latin*

uncomfortable ones for many Christians. How do liberation theologians view the cross and the resurrection? Does a message stressing liberation for the poor and the oppressed actually stem from the life of Jesus, or is it a merely religious projection by activists seeking radical social and political reforms? Do liberation theologians have a view of Jesus that is ultimately consistent with the accounts found in the gospels?

Batstone investigates the possible relevance of Christ's historic mission to the Latin American political experience, noting that every "Christology" (view of Christ) implies a specific "horizon of interest" or ideology or both. Every view of Christ, he postulates, contains embedded religious and political interests and assumptions, and liberation theology is no exception. Batstone demonstrates convincingly that like every other Christology, liberation theology stresses only selected aspects of Jesus' life while ignoring many other aspects of that life. Batstone suggests that although a majority of liberation theologians emphasize the universal significance of Jesus' life, most stop short of noting that a major reason for the universal appeal of Jesus' life is that he embodied his message and cause in a specific ideological form that gave it meaning. According to Batstone, it is therefore intellectually justifiable to speculate about Jesus as a political activist and to make assumptions about Jesus' relation to the zealots and other popular forms of Jewish resistance to Roman occupation. Liberation theologians, to their detriment, tend to avoid such speculations.

Batstone cogently observes that the subject matter of liberation theologians' texts are structured largely in terms of thought taken from the European Enlightenment. The questions they address were first posed in Europe—not in Latin America. As Robert McAfee Brown points out in his foreword, too much liberation theology is written not "from below" (by the people in response to their own needs) but is produced instead by professional scholars heavily influenced by German theological traditions. Batstone states repeatedly that liberation theologians accept unquestioningly most contemporary Biblical scholarship (including what is known as Higher Criticism) as well as many of the tacit assumptions of European hermeneutics.

Moreover, virtually all liberation theologians work within an ecumenical and hermeneutical framework that is unfamiliar to "the folk" for whom they profess to write. It is certainly difficult to imagine a semi-literate peasant plowing through the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Severino Croatto, or Jon Sobrino. It may indeed be true that liberation theologians write primarily for one another and that liberation theology is more informed by European "horizons of interest" and the conditions

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*American Church in a Changing Environment*, edited by Edward L. Cleary and Hannah Stewart-Gambino (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1992).

that gave rise to it than by the beliefs and practices of the Latin Americans whom they claim to represent. Taken out of context, much liberation theology is derivative, pedantic, and not especially compelling. Its primary significance and appeal may well be the social situation from which it sprang and the recognition that in professing and publishing these ideas, theologians and religious leaders have risked their lives and those of their followers. Frequently, proponents of liberation theology have given up a comfortable and privileged lifestyle in order to "cast their lots" with the poor.

An overriding positive theme permeating liberation theology is its struggle to integrate theory with practice. Liberation theologians are united in their advocacy for the poor in the face of political oppression. All liberation theologians seek to reshape theology to fit the life experiences of contemporary Christians in Latin America and to address what they perceive as a common culture. It remains unclear, however, exactly what constitutes "common culture" for Latin American societies. Batstone ends *From Conquest to Struggle* by acknowledging that liberation theologians may indeed be hopelessly out of touch with popular culture in Latin America.

*From Conquest to Struggle* serves as a pointed reminder that a theology "from below" is always in flux and that Christians in all times and places need to ask, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" Throughout this book, Batstone evidences an abiding and uncompromising concern for the peoples of Latin America as well as for the Latin American Catholic Church. His approach is refreshing, especially when he applies the same rigorous analytical tools to ideas with which he sympathizes as he applies to those with which he is clearly out of sympathy. Such an approach is rare in the literature on liberation theology and makes *From Conquest to Struggle* a powerful and stimulating book.

In addressing the broader issue of what motivates religious individuals to become involved in politics, Edward Lynch's *Religion and Politics in Latin America: Liberation Theology and Christian Democracy* charts the painful and sometimes tragic failure of liberation theology and the Christian Democratic movements in Nicaragua and Venezuela. Lynch concludes that in both countries, the goals of liberation theology and Christian Democracy were never fully realized due to compromise of founding principles. According to his argument, liberation theology has not been more successful because it contains just enough Christianity to be a threat to orthodox Christianity but not enough Marxism to be a threat to the status quo. Thus its appeal is self-limiting. Like liberation theologians, Christian Democrats seemed all too willing to alter their original principles in order to survive politically, and their concern for individuals and an autonomous society was abandoned in exchange for electoral success. Like many similar movements in Latin America and elsewhere, Christian

Democrats in Nicaragua and Venezuela ended up sacrificing moral authority and clarity of vision for limited degrees of political power. As a result, they lost favor with followers and diminished their overall effectiveness in reaching their stated goals. With regard to liberation theology, Lynch contends that Nicaraguans and Venezuelans have remained loyal to a traditional, hierarchical Catholic Church largely because the traditional church has maintained greater credibility than the alternative belief systems. He points out that in Venezuela, for example, the Catholic Church preempted the potential impact of liberation theology by adhering strictly to traditional Catholic teachings on social justice. As a consequence, liberation theology is "almost nonexistent in Venezuela" (p. 149), with the possible exceptions of the writings of Antonio Pérez Esclarín and Otto Maduro.

*Religion and Politics in Latin America* constitutes a welcome corrective to the literature. Although scholarly treatments of liberation theology abound, most of the few book-length works that have analyzed Christian Democracy are badly out-of-date, such as Edward Williams's seminal *Latin American Christian Democratic Parties*<sup>2</sup> and Thomas Walker's *The Christian Democratic Movement in Nicaragua*.<sup>3</sup> By incorporating recent information and perspectives into his presentation, Lynch ably fills a gap in scholarly understanding of democratic institutions in Nicaragua and Venezuela.

Edward Cleary's *Born of the Poor: The Latin American Church since Medellín* presents thirteen essays examining the influence of liberation theology and the impact of the 1968 Bishops' Conference in Medellín, Colombia, and the 1979 Bishops' Conference in Puebla, Mexico. Many contributors discuss their personal experiences at the conference. A major strength of this collection is its solid overview arising out of a variety of disciplines and perspectives: theological, pastoral, administrative, journalistic, sociological, and political (sadly missing is the ethnological perspective). *Born of the Poor* also provides a welcome assessment of the often ignored influence of Latin American churches on churches in the United States and Canada, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Although most of the contributors clearly favor a progressive stance, as much attention is given to divergences as to common themes. Authors openly acknowledge controversies and issues of disagreement as well as important items of general agreement.

*Born of the Poor* begins appropriately with Gustavo Gutiérrez's succinct presentation of key ideas in Latin American theology in which he argues unambiguously that the major role played by Medellín was to

2. See Edward J. Williams, *Latin American Christian Democratic Parties* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1967).

3. Thomas W. Walker, *The Christian Democratic Movement in Nicaragua* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1970).

signal a dramatic change in focus for the Catholic Church. He contends that after Medellín, the church began to perceive itself as being present in the world of the poor and that the “preferential option for the poor” is not just a Latin American issue. According to Gutiérrez, the pressing question is both Biblical and evangelical (p. 24).

Gutiérrez’s essay is followed by Alfred Hennelly’s able assessment of the inroads of liberation theology in the United States, Canada, and Europe. Hennelly, a professor of theology at Fordham University, convincingly documents liberation theology’s entrance into the mainstream of theological and religious education in the United States. He underscores the widespread dissemination in the United States of the works of Paulo Freire<sup>4</sup> and Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza<sup>5</sup> as well as the significance and power of a growing Hispanic church in the United States.

*Born of the Poor* then shifts to descriptions of the Medellín and Puebla conferences, including personal recollections by participants such as the late journalist Penny Lernoux and Panamanian archbishop Marcos McGrath.<sup>6</sup> Also found in this section is an account by Jaime Wright, moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Brazil, of his struggles in documenting predominantly Catholic violations of human rights in Brazil.

Together the essays in *Born of the Poor* vividly capture the tensions, hopes, and dynamism of the Catholic Church in Latin America today. Most notable are essays that attempt to link Catholic teachings to political and economic distress in the region, such as the essays by educator Luis Ugalde, economist José Pablo Arellano, and political scientist Scott Mainwaring. Collectively, these authors paint a picture of a continent undergoing severe crisis. Essays by Jean-Yves Cálvez and Marie Augusta Neale devote much-needed attention to the worldwide prophetic role of Latin American churches. As Sister Neale concludes, “The social and economic, the political and international problems—the questions of justice and peace—present themselves in various ways in different countries of the world. But the intensity with which the Latin American churches took them into account clearly pushed other churches to question themselves. The effect has not been weakened, even after some of the more radical aspects of liberation theology have been challenged” (p. 194).

David Lehmann’s *Democracy and Development in Latin America: Eco-*

4. See especially Daniel Schipani, *Religious Education Encounters Liberation Theology* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1988); and Alfred A. Hennelly, *Theology for a Liberating Church: The New Praxis of Freedom* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1989).

5. See Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads, 1988). Schussler-Fiorenza expresses her vision of a “woman-church” as the baptismal call of all women to a discipleship of equals and a bonding in sisterhood for empowerment.

6. See Penny Lernoux, *People of God: The Struggle for World Catholicism* (New York: Viking, 1989).

*nomics, Politics, and Religion in the Postwar Period* surveys Latin American economic development and “developmentalist” theory since the 1930s. Lehmann, Assistant Director of Development Studies at Cambridge University and Director of the Center for Latin American Studies, focuses on major intellectual currents, Catholic thought, and popular social movements, three overlapping areas that have usually been treated separately in the literature. He attempts to assess and integrate diverse Latin American perspectives, paying special attention to the historical experiences of Argentina, Brazil, and Chile.

Lehmann argues emphatically for sustained grassroots advocacy, or *basismo*, through which the “voiceless poor strive to achieve basic needs,” and for the formation of local organizations as alternatives to the corrupt and inefficient state bureaucracies pervading the region. In Lehman’s estimation, *basismo* constitutes a highly viable development model that has yet to be tried. Lehmann even goes so far as to suggest that pressures from below may actually work to reform inefficient state bureaucracies, although he offers little concrete data to support this assertion.

*Democracy and Development* is intended for Latin American intellectuals who are disenchanted with grand theories but are still optimistic about the possibility for meaningful change. Lehmann attempts to bridge the gap between post-Marxist democratic theory and local-level politics by advocating his own brand of radical *basismo*, or “*basismo* as if it really mattered” (p. xiv). He is concerned that the alternatives provided by structural economics, “dependency and world-system” theory, and liberation theology are likely to be too “destabilizing” in a Latin American context. In his view, only *basismo* has the potential “to bring about changes in a sustainable and lasting manner” (p. 212).

Lehmann’s final section presents a comprehensive synthesis of his personal vision for development in Latin America, offering an agenda for the reinvention of Latin American civil societies on the verge of collapse. This section, a highly accessible if biased introduction to Latin American political economy, outlines lucidly the origins of dependency theory, the rise of liberation theology, and the nature of grassroots politics. The section also includes insightful analysis of major social movements in the region in terms of their contributions to international change.

*Church and Politics in Latin America*, edited by Dermot Keogh of University College in Cork, consists of twenty-one essays by prominent theologians, educators, politicians, and writers. A compelling forward by novelist Graham Greene reflects on the many changes that have taken place since he joined the Roman Catholic Church in the 1930s. Contributors offer fresh perspectives on major themes involving the church in Latin America from a variety of disciplines and viewpoints.

In the first part, sociologist and historian Emile Poulat and political scientist Daniel Levine outline basic trends in the region, while jour-

nalist Peter Hebblethwaite looks at the role of the Vatican and sociologist François Houtart considers that of the Conferencia Episcopal Latinoamericana (CELAM). Also in this section, Jon Sobrino reports on the Special Rome Synod from the perspective of a Latin American Jesuit.

The second part contains two essays by Sobrino and Edna McDonagh focusing on the Catholic Church's responses to violence. The third part deals with politics and the gospel in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. It features a welcome reprinting of Conor Cruise O'Brien's 1986 essay "God and Man in Nicaragua" as well as four essays by eminent Jesuit historian Rodolfo Cardenal. This section ends dramatically with a poem eulogizing the martyred Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero. "Elegy for the Murdered Bishop" was written by the distinguished Salvadoran writer and poet Italo López Vallecillos, who died in exile in 1985.

The fourth part (by far the longest) recounts the responses of the Catholic Church when confronted by revolution and counterrevolutionary forces. Historian Margaret Crahan of Occidental College examines the uncertain and often contradictory role played by the Catholic Church in Fidel Castro's Cuba.<sup>7</sup> In other essays, Soledad Loeza-Lajous analyzes continuity and change within the Mexican Catholic Church; Leonard Martin deals adeptly with the complexities of the Brazilian Catholic Church; Brian Smith assesses valiant attempts by the church to adjust to three diverse political regimes in Chile over a thirty-year period; Andrea O'Brien outlines confrontations between the church and the Stroessner regime in Paraguay; and Emilio Mignone provides poignant observations on the Catholic Church, human rights, and the "dirty war" in Argentina. Mignone estimates conservatively that some one hundred clerics were arrested, tortured, or assassinated in Argentina between 1970 and 1983. The last essay in this section, Patrick Rice's "The Disappeared: A New Challenge to Christian Faith in Latin America," merits special mention because Rice, a human rights organizer, was himself "disappeared" in Argentina in 1976.

Keogh is to be commended for compiling such a varied and stimulating collection, doubtless the best edited and most accessible of the volumes considered in this review. Most of its essays could stand alone, as several already have in other contexts. One shortcoming is that some essays appear to take off in different directions at once, introducing too many ideas and leaving the reader hanging. Thus the Keogh collection sometimes lacks the clarity of theme and purpose that characterizes Cleary's *Born of the Poor* or the predictably greater coherence of the single-author volumes by Batstone, Van Vugt, Lynch, and Lehmann. *Church and*

7. See also John M. Kirk, *Between God and the Party: Religion and Politics in Revolutionary Cuba* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1989).



*Politics in Latin America* is nonetheless an excellent collection of essays that is destined to reach a wide audience of general readers and specialists alike.

Taken together, the six volumes considered in this review stand as testimony to the struggles of a valiant few willing to challenge corruption, violence, torture, "disappearance," and terror to achieve small victories despite enormous odds. Such victories have been short-lived, however. As Emile Poulat observed, "one finds between Church and State all over Latin America the experience of a conflict, sometimes grave, always cyclical, in which the evolution of relationships never culminates either in a definitive elimination or a perfect solution" (*Church and Politics in Latin America*, p. 15). Thus although the volumes reviewed here cannot represent the last word on church-state relations in the region,<sup>8</sup> they nonetheless contribute to an indispensable record of the development of twentieth-century Latin American religious and political thought.

8. The role of Protestantism must also be considered. See David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); and *Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America*, edited by Virginia Garrard Burnett and David Stoll (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1993).