Marxism and Liberation Theology
Michael Löwy
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Is religion still, as Marx and Engels saw it in the nineteenth century, a bulwark of reaction, obscurantism and conservatism? To a large extent, the answer is yes. Their view still applies to various leading circles in the Church, to the fundamentalists currents of the main faiths (Christian, Jewish, Moslem), to many evangelist groups (and their expression in the self-called "Electronic Church"), and to the majority of the new religious sects – some of which, as the notorious Moon Church, are nothing but a skillful combination of financial manipulations, obscurantist brain-washing and finacial anti-communism.

However, the emergence of revolutionary Christianity and liberation theology in Latin America (and elsewhere) opens a new historical chapter and raises exciting new questions which cannot be answered without a renewal of the Marxist analysis of religion.

Initially, when confronted with such phenomena, Marxists applied a traditional model of interpretation which counterposed Christian workers and peasants, whom they considered to be supporters of the revolution, to the Church (the clergy), a thoroughly reactionary body. As late as 1966, they could still view the death of one of their number of that Church, Father Camilo Torres, who had joined the Colombian guerrilla and been killed in a confrontation with the Army that year, as an exceptional case. But the growing commitment of Christians – including many religious and priests – to popular struggles and their massive involvement in the Sandinista revolution clearly showed the need for a new approach.

Another traditional standpoint is to counterpoise the radical rank-and-file of the Church to its conservative hierarchy; this may be partially true, but is no longer adequate when a large number of bishops have declared their solidarity with liberation movements of the poor, and, moreover, when this commitment has sometimes cost them their lives, as was the case with Monsignor Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, assassinated by a death squad in March 1980.

Marxists who are disinterested or confused by these developments still resort to the usual distinction between the valid social practice of these Christians, and their theological ideology, defined as necessarily repressive and idealist. However, with liberation theology we see the appearance of religious thinking using Marxist concepts and inspiring struggles for social liberation.

It is time Marxists realize something new is happening. It is of world historical importance. A significant sector of the Church – both believers and clergy – in Latin America is in the process of changing its position in the field of the class struggle, and going over with its material and spiritual resources to the side of the working people and their fight for a new society.

This new phenomenon has little connection with the former "dialogue" between Christians and Marxists – conceived as two separate camps – and even less with the dull diplomatic negotiations between the bureaucratic apparatuses of the Church and Party. The caricatural example of the latter was the recent Budapest "meeting between Christians and Marxists" – that is, between representatives of the Vatican and East European states. What is happening around liberation theology in Latin America (and in the Philippines and elsewhere) is something quite different: a new fraternity between revolutionaries, believers and non-believers, within an emancipatory dynamic outside the control of either Rome or Moscow.

Unhappily, all this signifies a theoretical and practical challenge to Marxists. It shows these shortcomings of the "classic" Marxist conception of religion – especially in its vulgarized version, reduced to the materialism and anti-clericalism of the eighteenth century bourgeois philosophers. Nevertheless, we can find in Marx's and Engels's writings – and in those of some modern Marxists – concepts and analyses that can help us understand today's rather surprising reality.

\[Chapters III, VIII and Appendix are translated from French by John Berrigan. Thanks to Joan Batsa, Ariane Mari and Abra Quinn for help in producing this notebook.\]
I. Marxism and religion: the opium of the people?

The well-known phrase "religion is the opium of the people" is considered as the quintessence of the Marxist conception of the religious phenomenon by most of its supporters and opponents. First of all we should remember that this statement is not specifically Marxist. The same phrase can be found, in various contexts, in the writings of Kant, Herder, Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer and Heinrich Heine...

Marx...

Moreover, an attentive reading of the whole Marxian paragraph where this phrase appears, shows that its author is more nuanced than usually believed. He takes into account the dual character of religion:

"Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of an unspiritual situation. It is the opium of the people." (1)

If one reads the whole essay - "Toward the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", written in 1844 - it clearly appears that Marx's viewpoint owes more to left Hegelianism, which saw religion as the alienation of the human essence, than to eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophy, which simply denounced it as a clerical conspiracy. In fact when Marx wrote the above passage he was still a disciple of Feuerbach, a "pre-Marxist," without any class reference. But it was nevertheless dialectical since it grasped the contradictory character of the religious phenomenon: sometimes a legitimation of existing society and sometimes a protest against it. It was only later - particularly with "The German Ideology" (1846) - that the strictly Marxist study of religion as a social and historical reality began. This involved an analysis of religion as one of the many forms of ideology, the spiritual production of a people, the production of ideas, representations and consciousness - all of which are necessarily conditioned by material production and the corresponding social relations. (2) However, from that moment on, Marx paid very little attention to religion as such, that is as a specific cultural/ideological universe of meaning.

2) Karl Marx, German Ideology (1846), London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974.
5) F. Engels, "The Peasant War in Germany" (1850), in Feuer, op.cit., pp. 422-475.
Kantian rather than and quite and to the different ... as a transformation of the idea sketched out by Marx and Engels, or to their application to a particular reality.

Kautsky, Lenin, Luxembourg

This was the case for example with Karl Kautsky’s historical studies on primitive Christianity, modified by the ideas sketched out by Marx and Engels, or to their application to a particular reality. Engels even went so far as to draw an astonishing parallel with Lenin. Kautsky’s ... on religion ... is a multiplicity of religious traditions: there is a religious 'philosophical belief' (inco-Kantian inspiration) rather than to concrete historical religious traditions. (13)

The Communist International

In the Communist International little attention was paid to religion. A significant number of Christians were joined the International. A significant number of Christians were even members of the Comintern. The dominant intellectual orientation of this movement was the Marxist-Leninist intellectual orientation. (14)

Rosa Luxemburg’s intuition, that one could ... is the most gigantic ‘metaphysics,’ that history has ever known, since it is the most grandiose attempt to reconcile, in a mystical form, the all-pervading contradictions of historical life. It affirms, in fact, that mankind has the same ‘nature,’ that man ... in so far as created by God, son of God, is therefore brother of other men, equal to other men. It has come about that in every radical stirring of the multitude, in one way or another, with particular forms and particular ideologies, these demands have always been raised.”

He also insisted on the incalculable differences of the Church according to ideological orientations—liberal, modernist, Jesuitic and fundamentalist currents within Catholic culture—and according to the different social classes. “Every religion ... is a multiplicity of different and often contradictory religions; there is a Catholicism for the peasants, a Catholicism for the petty bourgeoisie and urban workers, a Catholicism for women, and a Catholicism for intellectuals ...”

Most of these notes relate to the history and present role of intellectuals in Catholic Church in Italy: its social and political expression through Catholic Action and the People’s Party, its relation to the State and subordinate classes, etc. He was particularly interested in the way traditional intellectuals were recruited and used as instruments of hegemony by the Church. “Although it has organized a marvellous mechanism of ‘democratic’ selection of its intellectuals, they have been selected as single individuals and not as the representative expression of popular groups.”

10 J. L. Row, 1987, ch. 5.
12 Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks.
The development of Christian base communities

Noteworthy is the fact that the concept of solidarity, as its potential for revolt. The first requires the use of armed force. The second one however requires a coherent religious doctrine, it has enormously contributed to its extension and reinforcement.

Gandhi's analyses are rich and stimulating, but in the last analysis, they do not innovate in the method of approaching religion. Ernst Bloch is the first Marxist author who radically changed the theoretical framework – without abandoning the Marxist and revolutionist approaches. In a similar way to Engels, he distinguished two socially opposed currents: on one side the theocratic religion of the official churches, opium of the people, a mystifying apparatus at the service of the powerful; on the other the underground, subversive and heretical religion of the Albigensians, the Hussites, Joachim de Floro, Thomas Münzer, Franz von Baader, Wilhelm Weitling and Leo Tolstoy. However, unlike Engels, Bloch refused to see religion solely as a "cloak" of class interests – he explicitly criticized this conception, while attributing it to Kautsky only… In its protest and rebellious forms religion is one of the most significant forms of utopian consciousness, one of the richest expressions of the hope principle. Through its capacity of creative anticipation, the Judeo-Christian theology of death and immortality – Bloch's favorite religious universe – marks out the imaginary space of the not-yet-becoming.

Basing himself on these presuppositions, Bloch develops a heterodox and iconoclastic interpretation of the Bible – both the Old and the New Testaments – drawing out the Biblical pauperism, that denounces the Pharaohs and calls on each and everyone to choose Caesar aut Christus – neither Caesar nor Christ.

A religious atheist – according to him only an atheist can be a good Christian and vice-versa – and a theology of the revolutionaries, Bloch not only produced a Marxist reading of millenarianism (following Engels in his book The dogma of Christ (1930), used Marxism and psychoanalysis to illuminate the messianic, plebeian, egalitarian and anti-authoritarian essence of primitive Christianity. And Walter Benjamin tried to combine a unique and original synthesis, theology and Marxism. Jewish Messianism and historical materialism. (18)

Lucien Goldmann's work is another path-breaking attempt to renew the Marxist study of religion. Although of a very different inspiration than Bloch, he was also interested in redeeming the moral and human value of religious tradition. In his book The Hidden God (1955) he developed a very subtle and innovative sociological analysis of the Jansenist heresy (including Racine's theater and Pascal's philosophy) as a tragic world-view, expression of a social situation and a social layer (the robe nobility) in seventeenth century France. The most surprising and original part of this work is however the attempt to compare – without assimilating one to another – religious faith and Marxist faith: both share in common the refusal of pure individualism (rationalist or empiricist) and the belief in trans-individual values – God for religion, the human community for socialism. A similar analysis exists between the Pascalian wager on the existence of God and the Marxist wager on the liberation of humanity: both presuppose risk, the danger of failure and the hope of success. Both imply the Kingdom of Freedom is perceived as the direct heir of the ontological and collectivist heresies of the past.

Of course Bloch, like the young Marx of the famous 1844 quotation, recognized the dual character of the religious phenomenon, its oppressive aspect as well as its potential for revolt. The first requires the use of armed force. The second one however requires a coherent religious doctrine, it has enormously contributed to its extension and reinforcement.

...and a doctrine

Although there are significant differences between these theologians, several basic lines can be found in their work. They all attempted to deconstruct the official, clerical version, but there also exists a Protestant one) is not only among cardinals of the Holy See but also among bishops. In a coherent religious doctrine, it has enormously contributed to its extension and reinforcement.

What is liberation theology? Why does it cause concern not only in the Vatican but in the Pentagon, not only among cardinals of the Holy See but also among bishops? Why did the representatives of Latin American armies assembled in Mar del Plata (Uruguay) in November 1987 think it necessary to issue a confidential document analyzing it? Quite obviously because the stakes involved are of social and economic interests, we fall into the sort of reductionist approach which prevents us from understanding the richness and authenticity of the real movement.

Liberation theology, as a body of writings produced since 1970 by figures like Gustavo Gutierrez (Peru), Ruben Alves, Hugo Assmann, Carlos Mesters, Leonardo and Clodomiro Bobb (Brazil), Jon Sobrino, Ignacio Ellacuría (El Salvador), Segundo Galilea, Ronaldo Munoz (Chile), Pablo Richard (Chile - Costa Rica), Josè Miguel Bonino, Juan Carlos Scannone (Argentina), Enrique Dussel (Argentina - Mexico), Juan-Luis Segundo (Uruguay) – to name only some of the best known – is the spiritual product (the term comes, as we know from Marx's German Ideology) of this social movement, but in legitimating it, in providing it with a coherent religious doctrine, it has enormously contributed to its extension and reinforcement.

Although there are significant differences between these theologians, several basic lines can be found in their work. They all attempted to deconstruct the official, clerical version, but there also exists a Protestant one.

1 - A sharp moral and social indictment of dependent capitalism as an unjust and iniquitous system, as a form of structural sin.
2 - The use of the Marxist instrument in order to understand the causes of poverty, the contradictions of capitalism and the forms of class struggle.
3 - The preferential option for the poor and solidarity with their struggle for self-liberation.
4 - The development of Christian base communities among the poor as a new form of Church and as an alternative to the individualism of the rich imposed by the capitalist system.
5 - A new reading of the Bible, giving significant attention to passages like Exodus – a paradigm of of an enslaved people's struggle for liberation.
6 - The fight against idolatry (and not atheism) as the main enemy of religion – i.e. against the new idols of death adored by the new Pharaohs, the new Caesars and the new Hierods: Mammon, Wealth, Power, National Security, the State, Military Force, "Western Christian Civilization."
7 - Historical human liberation as the anticipation...
III. Origins and Development of Liberation Theology

What are the causes of the emergence of this new current breaking with a long conservative and regressive tradition? Why was it able to develop in the Latin American Church at a given historical moment, namely the early 1960's?

Of the attempts to explain this phenomenon, one of the most significant is the one put forward by Thomas C. Lowry (pp. 286-297), 

1) A powerfull conservative and traditionalist current (with a certain intellectual autonomy in relation to the Roman authorities), ready to defend human rights and support certain social demands of the poor; this is the position which prevailed at the Puebla Conference in 1970.

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4) A small but influential minority of radicals, sympathetic to liberation theology and capable of active solidarity with the popular, workers and peasants movements. Its best known representatives are Bishops (or Cardinals) like Mendez Arceo (Mexico), Pedro Casaldaly and Paolo Arna (Brazil), Prontio (Ecuador).

Within this current, the most advanced section is represented by revolutionary Christianite: the "Christians for Socialism Movement" and other tendencies which identify with Sandinismo, Camilo Torres or Christian Marxism.

This means that the division inside the Church cannot be reduced to the usual vertical model: "those from below" - popular Christian movements, base communities, Christian trade-unionsists - are opposed to the oligarchs: the hierarchy, bishops and heads of the institution. It is also horizontal, running through the whole clerical body from top down, from the Episcopal Conference to the religious orders, diocesan clergy. But one should not forget that we are dealing with contradictions inside an institution which nevertheless preserves its unity, not only because all sides involved want to avoid a schism, but also because its religious aims appear as non-reducible to the social or political arena.

Currents at every level

Inside the Church in each country one can also find oppressed tendencies - as in Nicaragua where many priests support the Sandinista revolution, while most bishops side with the contras. One can see a sharp differentiation in the continent-wide institutions too: while CELAM, the Conference of Latin American Bishops, controlled since 1972 by the conservatives, wages an intensive struggle against liberation theology, CLAR, the Conference of Latin American Religious Communities, even in its relations with the religious orders: Jesus, Dominicans, Franciscaanse, etc. does not hide its sympathy for the "Church of the Poor".

But it would be a very distorted picture to present the Church as divided between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary factions... First of all, many priests, nuns and bishops (as well as laymen and women) do not exactly correspond to one or another position. Moreover, there is a full rainbow of shades between the two above-mentioned stances. One can distinguish at least four tendencies inside the Latin American Churches:

1) A very small group of fundamentalists, defending ultra-conservative and religious criteria: for instance, the group "Tradition, Family and Property." They believe that the Church should resist any attempt to change the traditional ideas about the Church's mission, the social order, etc.

2) A powerful conservative and traditionalist current, hostile to liberation theology and organically linked to the ruling classes (as well as to the Roman Curia): for instance, Monsignor Lopez Trujillo and the CELAM leadership. A recent example of this is the attitude of the Church in Chile, where the武装 forces are backed up by the clergy and the hierarchy.

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of the new Church of the poor, whose origins, it should be noted, date back to before Vatican II. In a symbolic way, one might say that the radical Christian current of February 1959 at the moment of the historic Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and their comrades marched into Havana while, in Rome, John XIII issued his first call for the convocation of the Council.

From the periphery to the center

The new social movement arose first among the groupings which were located at the intersection of these two sets of changes: in the lay movements (and some members of the clergy) active among student youth, in outlying neighborhoods, the urban and rural trade unions and the base communities. In other words: the liberation of Latin American Catholic culture which was to lead to the formation of liberation theology did not start, top-down, from the upper reaches of the Church, as the functionalist analysts pointing to the hierarchy's search for influence would suggest, nor from the bottom up, as argued by certain "populist" interpretations, but from the periphery to the center. The categories or social sectors encompassed in the religious-sociocultural field that were to become the driving force of renewal were all, in one way or another, marginal or peripheral in relation to the institution: lay preaching and its chaplains, lay experts, foreign priests, religious orders. The first bishops to be affected were generally those with links to one or another of these categories. In some cases, the movement within the "center" and influenced episcopal conferences (particularly in Brazil), in others, it remained blocked at the "margins" of the institution.

Lay Catholic movements, such as Catholic University, Catholic Action, the base communities, Grass-roots educational movements (Brazil) or for the promotion of land reform (Nicaragua), the Federations of Christian Peasants (El Salvador) and above all, the base Christian community of the CELAM (the Conference of Latin American Bishops) (1969).

Role of the regular clergy

Within the institution itself, the religious orders were in the vanguard of the new practice and theological thinking. This was true in particular of the Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans, Maryknolls, Capuchins and Cervantes. The religious orders — a total of 157,000 people in all Latin America — are the single largest group staffing the new social pastoral and leading base communities. Most well-known liberation theologians are religious and, as mentioned earlier, the CLR (Confederation of Latin American Religious, founded in 1959) holds far more radical positions than the CELAM (the Conference of Latin America Bishops). In some countries, this difference is reflected in more or less open conflict between the bishops and the religious orders, while elsewhere, the secular clergy too has contributed to changing the whole Church.

How can one explain the particularly prominent commitment of the orders? One element that must be considered is the protest — both against the world and within the Church itself — by the clergy: the monastic utopia itself; in an article written in 1971, Jean Séguy suggests that this utopian dimension can help us to understand "certain links between Catholic religious orders and revolutionary activity" in Latin America. (23) In addition, religious orders enjoy a certain autonomy within the Church and are less subject to the direct control of the ecclesiastical hierarchy than the diocesan clergy. Another important factor is the high level of education received by the regular clergy, in particular, the Jesuits and other orders who were trained in the academic institutions that sprang up in the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, their education gives them the ability to learn and communicate in Latin America, a country where the priests and religious orders have a strong influence. This was true in particular of the Jesuits and Dominicans, who were the first to embrace the views of the CELAM and the Bishops' Conference of Latin America (CLAR), which was founded in the late 1960s. The Religious Orders of the Church, as the functionalist analyses suggest, nor from the bottom up, as argued by certain "populist" interpretations, but from the periphery to the center. The categories or social sectors encompassed in the religious-sociocultural field that were to become the driving force of renewal were all, in one way or another, marginal or peripheral in relation to the institution: lay preaching and its chaplains, lay experts, foreign priests, religious orders. The first bishops to be affected were generally those with links to one or another of these categories. In some cases, the movement within the "center" and influenced episcopal conferences (particularly in Brazil), in others, it remained blocked at the "margins" of the institution.

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theology was born. The most advanced Latin American theologians – dissatisfied with the "development theology" which was dominant in Latin America – began to question social issues as early as the late 1960s. This was true in particular of Hugo Amin, a Brazilian theologian trained in Frankfurt who played a pioneering role in elaborating the first elements of a Christian and liberationist critique of desarrollismo (development) in 1970.

Gustavo Gutierrez

But it was in 1971, with the book of Gustavo Gutierrez – a Peruvian Jesuit and former student of the Catholic universities of Louvain and Lyons – that liberation theology was truly born. In his work entitled Liberation Theology, Gustavo Gutierrez advanced certain anti-establishment ideas that had a profoundly unsettling effect on the doctrine of the church. In the first place, he stressed the need to break with the dualism inherited from Greek thought: there are not two realities as alleged, one "temporal," the other "spiritual," nor are there two histories, one "sacred," the other "profane." There is only one history and it is in this human and temporal history that Redemption and the Kingdom of God must be realized. The point is not to wait for salvation from on high: the Biblical Exodus shows us "a man building himself by himself through the historical path of the struggle" (Goodell). Therefore, the struggle for a salvation that is not individual and private but communal and "public," in which it is not the soul of one individual that is at stake, but the redemption and liberation of a whole enslaved people. In this perspective, the poor are no longer an object of pity or charity but, as the Hebrew slaves, the agents of their own liberation.

As for the church, it must cease to be a cog in the ruling system: following the great tradition of the Biblical prophets and the personal example of Christ, it must oppose the powerful and denounce social injustice.

What does this mean for Latin America? According to Gutierrez, the poor people of the continent are "in exile on their own land." But at the same time: "in a Exodus march towards their redemption." Rejecting the ideology of development which has "become synonomous with reformism and modernization," that is, with limited, timid, ineffective measures that only make dependency worse, the Peruvian theologian proclaimed without hesitation that: "The complete destruction of the present state of things, the profound transformation of the ownership system, the coming to power of the exploited class, a social revolution will put an end to this process."

Conservative bishops appointed

At the conference of Latin American bishops held in Puebla in 1979, a real attempt to get things back under way was made. CELAM, the organizing body of the conference, forbade theologians from attending the conference. They were nevertheless present in the city of Puebla and through the intermediacy of certain bishops had a real influence on the debates; the ensuing comprommiso was summarized by the new famous formula of "the Church's preferential option for the poor" – a sufficiently general phrase to allow each current to interpret it according to their own inclinations.

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denounced liberation theology. With this move, a certain retreat on the part of the Church occurred in Latin America in the last ten to fifteen years.

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A few important dates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Cuba Victory of the July 26 Movement</td>
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<td>1960</td>
<td>Latin America Latin Confederation of Labour (CLAR) founded</td>
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<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Brazil Catholic University Youth (JUC) publish A Few Key Ideas Towards a Historical Ideal for the Brazilian People</td>
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<td>Argentina fountain of the Sandinista revolution</td>
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<td>1964</td>
<td>Nicaragua Peasant Delegates of the Word found the Association of Rural Workers (ATC)</td>
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<td>1967</td>
<td>Bolivia The Catholic Left of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) meets in Medellin</td>
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<td>1968</td>
<td>Nicaragua Christian University Movement founded</td>
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<td>1969</td>
<td>Chile Creation of Movement for United People’s Action (MAPu)</td>
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<td>1970</td>
<td>Nicaragua San Pablo base community founds the Christian Youth Movement</td>
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<td>1970</td>
<td>Brazil Dom Paulo Evaristo Araujo appointed Bishop of Sao Paulo</td>
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<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Peru Gustavo Gutierrez’s Liberation Theology – Perspectives is published</td>
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<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Chile Continent-wide movement Christians for Socialism is founded</td>
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<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Chile September: military coup under Pinchot</td>
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<td>1977</td>
<td>Brazil Bishops and Provincials of various orders of the Northeast and Center-West publish a document denouncing the military dictatorship and capitalism</td>
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<td>1979</td>
<td>Brazil Foundation of Workers Party (PT)</td>
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<td>1981</td>
<td>Brazil Leonardo Boff publishes Church, Charity and Power</td>
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<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Rome Inaction on Some Aspects of Liberation Theology Three Nicaraguan priests holding governmental posts in Nicaragua suspended a divina by the pope</td>
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<td>1985</td>
<td>Rome Inaction on Christian Liberty and Liberation Cuba Conversation of Fidel Castro with Frei Betto on religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Brazil The newly elected Sao Paulo city council under Laiza Eiduanda, of the Workers Party, appoints Paulo Freire director of schools</td>
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IV. The Brazilian Church

The Brazilian Church is a unique case in Latin America, insofar as it is the only Church on the continent where liberation theology and its pastoral followers won a decisive influence. The importance of this fact is obvious, considering that this is the largest Cath­olic Church in the world. Moreover, the new Brazilian popular movements – the radical trade-union confed­eration (CUT), the radical peasant movements, the poor neighborhood associations – and their political expres­sion, the new Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalha­dores - PT), are to a significant extent the product of the grass-roots activity of committed Christians, by pastoral agents and basic Christian communities. Traditionally the Brazilian Church had been rather conservative and a bulwark of fervent anti-communism. Two examples may illustrate how radical was the change of its position in the field of class struggle: Gregorio Bezerra, a well-known Brazilian Commu­nist leader, recounts in his memoirs how, during a meeting in a small town in the North-East, around 1946 (when the Communist Party was legalized) he was threatened by a fanatical mob, led by the local pri­est, shouting “Death to communism! Long live Christ the king!” The Communist leader was forced to run for his life and finally took refuge at the local police head­quarters, in order to escape from this obscurantist mob. Thirty five years we have exactly the same scenario: during a metalworkers’ strike in Sao Paulo, in 1980, a demonstration of trade-unionist of the Sandinista Front is killed in a clash with the National Guard |

Military coup

The Brazilian Catholic Left of the 1960s developed the first uniquely Latin-American theology, and it was a true forerunner of Liberation Theology. However, unlike the Church of the Poor in the 1970s, it was an “elite” movement, with a limited mass following and it was soon attacked and de-legitimated by the hierarchy. After 1964 AP moved away not only from the Church but also from Christianity (although it still enjoyed the support of many Christians, both lay and clerical), and the majority of its members joined the Main Stream Movement (PGdB) |

In April 1964, the military took power, in order to save “Western Christian Civilization” from “atheistic communism,” i.e. to defend the capitalist order threat­ened by the rise of social movements under the elected president Joao Goulart. In June 1964, the Bishops’
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conference (Conferencia nacional dos Bispos Brasileiros - CNBB) issued a statement supporting the coup.

However a significant minority of priests (and some bishops) as well as many religious and lay Church people opposed the military dictatorship. Some of them became radicalized and, during 1967-1968, a large group of Dominicans moved to support armed resistance and to help the displaced, led by Joao Marighella (the Action for National Liberation - ALN), by hiding its members or helping some of them to escape from the country. Soon several of them would be imprisoned and murdered by the military and the guerrilla movement destroyed.

The turn

The military repression against committed Church people increased many priests, nuns, religious, lay activists, Catholic Workers Young (JOC) members were arrested, tortured, raped and sometimes killed — the hierarchy remained silent. The main leader of the Church, Dom Agnelo Rossi, the Cardinal of Sao Paulo, obstinately refused to condemn torture, criticize the military or defend the victimized Christians. He continued Theological Formation after the Vatican’s Peace and Justice Commission published a documented report on repression and torture in Brazil and after Pope Paul VI himself spoke out against torture. Finally Dom Agnelo Rossi was dismissed to a high position in Rome and replaced in 1970 by a new bishop, Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns, who became one of the most active of the military’s agents and a staunch supporter of the base communities. At the same time, the CNBB, under a new leadership — Dom Ismael Loschi­ner — started also to raise its voice against the terrible violations of human rights by the military dictatorship. From that moment on, the Church became a staunch opponent of the regime and a refuge for all forms of popular protest against it.

In 1968 the bishops and provincial leaders of the various religious orders in the North-East and Center-West areas of Brazil issued two statements which denounced the military dictatorship but also what they called “the root of evil” — capitalism. These documents were, as a matter of fact, the most radical statements ever issued by a group of bishops anywhere in the world. The explicit commitment to the development re­formed by the regime and the ruling classes — savage capitalism expanding in the rural areas and exploiting the peasants from their land, growing social inequality and economic de­velopment, and ecological devastation caused by the nuclear power plants, Transamazionian highways — came under growing critical fire from the CNBB, which also denounced the numerous cases of torture and murder of the civilians by the military government. During the 1970s, after the guerrillas were defeated and before the new labor movement emerged, the Church appeared as the main adversary of the dictatorship and was demon­strated to be the enemy of the military government. Despite the fact that the 1960s have been described as a period of rapid social change for Brazil — with important changes in the labor, industrial and social structures and in the political culture of the base communities — it is not difficult to give a clear-cut answer to this question. Why is it that the Brazilian Church has become the most advanced in the continent, the first one where leftist ideas emerged (since 1960), and the only one where Liberation Theology has had such a wide influence? It is difficult to give a clear-cut answer to this ques­tion. There are at least several reasons which have to be taken into consideration, and whose combination produced the unique characteristics of Brazilian Catholicism:

1. The growing insufficiency of the clergy, too small to control the vast and quickly expanding popula­tion of the country. This had as a result the growing influence and importance of the Church as a political actor in the political process of the country — in particular of Catholic Action - which was precisely the dynamic factor in the radicalization of the 1960s.

2. The deep influence of the French Catholic Church in Brazil — in opposition to the rest of the continent, where the Spanish (and Italian) tradi­tion was predominant. But France happens to be the country where the most radical development in Chris­tian (particularly Catholic) life have arisen throughout the twentieth century: Charles Péguy’s religious socialism, Emmanuel Mounier and the Esprit group, the Christian Socialists of the Popular Front, the anti­fascist Christians of the Resistance (Mémographe), the new post-war theology (Cárez, Chêna, Duque, Lubac, etc.), Father Labrey’s humanist econom­ics, the labor-workers and the leftist turn of the Cath­olic Youth (JEC, IUC, UEC) during the 1950s and 1960s. Given the direct links be­tween French and Brazilian religious orders (particularly the Dominicans), the great number of French mission­aries active in Brazil and the traditional influence of the Catholic intellectuals on their Brazilian counterparts, there existed in the Brazilian Church a cultural environment much more receptive to new radical ideas than in the other Latin American countries.

3. The military dictatorship established in 1964. By progressively closing all the institutional channels for the expression of the popular protest after 1964, the military government was able to create a situation in which the only and effective way to resist the regime was through armed resistance. At the same time the military’s brutal repression of the radical sectors of the Church forced the institution as a whole to react and created a dynamic of permanent con­flict between the Church and the State.

It should be however stressed that the dictatorship in itself is not a sufficient explanation, since in other countries (Argentina?) it enjoyed the whole-hearted sup­port of the Church. Although the Church has supported the military coup of 1964, the presence of a significant radical current created the conditions for the change in 1970.

4. The speed and depth of the capitalist develop­ment since the 1950s has been much greater in Brazil than in other Latin American countries. The dizzying intensity of urbanization and industrialization, the swiftness and brutality of capitalist expansion in the rural areas created such an aggravation of social contra­dictions — such as growing social inequality, the explo­sion of the rural population from the land, the massive concentration of a poor population on the periphery of the urban areas — that it certainly contributed to the upsurge of liberation Christianity as a radical answer to this harmful and disastrous social situation.

5. The radical priests and theologians of the 1970s and the 1980s, learning the lessons from the 1960s - and from what happened in some Latin-American countries - opted for a patient work inside the institu­tion, trying not to cut themselves off from the bishops (trying therefore able to win some of them for Libera­tion Theology) and avoiding initiatives which could lead to their isolation and marginalization. While avoid­ing concessions on their basic options, they refused a dynamic of internal confrontation with the Church and concentrated their efforts on developing grass-roots organization, base communities and popular pastoral.

The best way to describe the historical radicalism of the Brazilian Church is perhaps to recount the story of a figure who played a key role in developing the political awareness of the Base Communities: Frei Betto — a Dominican religious known worldwide...
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Michael Löwy

since he published a series of talks with Fidel Castro on religion which have been translated into fourteen languages and gone through multiple editions in Latin America.

Frei Betto
Born in 1944 in the city of Belo Horizonte (State of Minas Gerais), Frei Betto—whose real name is Carlos Alberto Betto—became a leader of the Catholic Student Youth (JEC) in the early 1960s. He then entered the Dominican Order as a novice; at the time, the Order was one of the main places where a libertarian interpretation of Christianity was being elaborated. Shocked by the poverty of the people and the military dictatorship established by the coup of 1964, he linked up with a network of Dominicans who actively sympathized with the guerilla warfare. When repression intensified in 1969, Betto helped many revolutionary activists hide or quickly cross the border into Uruguay or Argentina. This activity earned him a prison sentence from the military regime which he served from 1969 to 1973. His letters from prison testify to his courageous spiritual resistance in a situation of defeat and repression.

In a fascinating book published recently in Brazil—Bairro de Sangue, Os dominicanos e a morte de Carlos Marighella of which already nine editions have been printed since its publication in 1987—he reviews this period at length, sketching the portrait of the ALN leader assassinated by the police in 1969, and that of his Dominican friends caught in the claws of the repressive machineries of imprisonment and subjected to torture. One of the most interesting scenes is the one in which Betto describes his own interrogation by a thug of the dictatorship:

"How can a Christian collaborate with a communist?

For me, men are not divided into believers and atheists, but between oppressors and oppressed, between those who want to keep this unjust society and those who want to struggle for justice.

Have you forgotten that Marx considered religion to be the opium of the people?

It is the bourgeoisie who has turned religion into an opium of the people by preaching a God, lord of the heavens only, while taking possession of the earth for itself.

The last chapter is dedicated to the tragic figure of Frei Tito de Alencar, so atrociously tortured by the Brazilian police that, even after his release from jail, he could not recover his mental balance. In exile in France, he still believed himself persecuted by his torturers and eventually committed suicide in August 1974.

In a novel published at the same time (1987) —O dia de Angelo— Frei Betto recounts the life and death of a Christian newspaperman who was imprisoned by the military regime and asked the "question." The conclusion of the book describes with great irony an 'informal' meeting of the liberal opposition party leadership— now in the government— where a decision is taken to "let bygones be bygones" and grant an amnesty to the torturers.

As soon as he was released from prison in 1973, Frei Betto devoted himself to organizing base communities; in the next few years, he published several pamphlets explaining in simple and accessible language the meaning of liberation theology and the role of the CELS. He soon became one of the main leaders of the national liberation movement where the base communities from all over Brazil exchanged their social, political and religious experiences. In 1980 he organized the Fourth International Congress of Third World Theologians.

V. Christianity and Sandinismo in Nicaragua

In 1968 some other parishes asked San Pablo for help in forming similar communities. Among them was the community of Solentiname, founded by Father Ernesto Cardenal. Father José de la Lira visited these new communities and suggested that they read and discuss the Gospel, as in Managua. After the Medellin conference, there was a much broader development of the CEBS, which spread to several poor shantytowns in Managua and to the people’s side— as well as a growing radicalization. The religious orders— particularly the women’s orders— were very active in this process, with the help of many foreign brothers and sisters; the most commended were the Mar- ryknolds, the Capuchins (who developed communities in the eastern and northern part of the country), the Jesuits and the Assumptionists.

Contact with the Front

In 1969 the San Pablo community in Managua decided to create a Christian Youth Movement, which was to radicalize very quickly; in the early 1970s many of its members became activists or sympathizers of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN). The Marxist guerrilla movement founded in the early 1960s by Carlos Fonseca and Tomás Borge began to absorb these young Christian radicals, without trying to impose any ideological conditions on them.

Meanwhile at the Catholic University (UCA — Universidad Centro-Americana) some teachers — the Franciscan Uriel Molina and the Jesuit Fernando Cardenal (Vice-rector of the UCA) — began a dialogue with the Marxist students linked to the FSLN. Some Christian students from the UCA decided in 1971 to live in the parish of Father Uriel Molina, the "El Rigo" neighborhood in Managua, and to share the community life of the poor. They formed the Christian University Movement, which soon established links with the FSLN while remaining independent. Finally, in 1973, priests (including Fernando Cardenal) and students from the UCA and from the barrios of East Managua formed the Christian Revolutionary Movement; several hundred of them soon joined the Sandinistas. The first Christian cell of the FSLN was formed with the participation of Luis Carrion, Joaquin Cuadra, Alvaro Balbino and Roberto Gutierrez, who would all become important leaders in the Front.

Delegates of the Word

In the countryside the Capuchins and Jesuits helped to create a lay leadership, the Delegates of the Word (Delegados de la Palabra), in order to celebrate certain sacraments in the rural areas not regularly served by a priest. They were trained to provide not only

1) Until the fall of Somoza

The Nicaraguan revolution is the first in modern times (since 1789) in which Christians—lay people and clergy—have a principal role, both at the grass-roots and leadership levels of a revolutionary movement.

Before the Medellin conference (1968), the Nicaraguan Church was a very traditionalist and socially conservative institution, which opened supported the Sino- ter Sandinista dictatorship. In 1950 its bishops issued a statement proclaiming that all authority derives from God and that Christians must therefore obey the established government. When Anastasio Somoza was killed in 1956 by the poet Rigoberto Lopez, the bishops paid homage to the deceased tyrant by nominating him "Prince of the Church." One could multiply such examples...

The first signs of change came thanks to a young Spanish priest, Father José de la Lira, who had been influenced by the pioneering experience of a new pastoral community in the neighboring country of Panama. The experiment had been implemented at the parish of San Miguelito by an American priest, Father Leo Mahon from Chicago, a man who believed that the missionaries in Latin America should be "revolutionaries, not modernizers." (27)

San Pablo and Solentiname

With the help of Maryknoll sister Maura Clark (who was to be killed in El Salvador in 1980) — and other sisters from various religious orders: Assumptionist, Theresian, Holy Heart of Jesus — José de la Lira started the first "base communities" at the parish of San Pablo, in the outskirts of Managua. Following the example of San Miguelito, he managed to show that the parish was not above all a Church building or a territory, but a community of brothers and sisters, a "Family of God." The people, the laity, were to participate actively in Church life, by reading and discussing the Bible in a kind of "socratic dialogue" with the priest or lay celebrant. There was little political content in the curriculum (cartillitos) of initiation, but the community gave its members — particularly the women — a feeling of personal dignity and collective initiative. The first result of this activity was the Misa Popular Nicaragüense, written and sung by the community.

religious services but also literacy courses, health and agricultural information, and they organized community meetings around Biblical texts, where the problems of the community were debated. In order to educate the Delegates of the Word, the Jesusis created in 1969 the Evangelical Committee for Agrarian Advancement (Comité Evangelico de Promocion Agraria - CEPA), which was staffed by the共有 of Carazo, Masaya, Leon, Esteli - future strongholds of the insurgency. This grassroots activity of priests, religious and lay Catholics flourished outside the direct control of the bishops.

The grass-roots activity of the Delegates of the Word, and their frequent victimization by Somoza’s National Guard, led many of them to the FSLN. In 1977 several of these peasant leaders formed a rural union, the Association of Workers of the Countryside (Asociacion de Trabajadores del Campo - ATC), which cooperated with the Sandinistas. By 1978, the FSLN cut informal links with the Church and became an independent Christian organization, also allied to the FSLN.

Represion and radicalization

A growing number of Christians began to join the fighting units of the Front. In 1977, several young people from the Solemnite community of Ernesto Cardenal took part in an attack by the FSLN against the San Carlos Barracks of the National Guard. In reprisal the Somoza Army destroyed the community and burned it to the ground. The same year, a Spanish-born priest, Father Gaspar Garcia Laviana, a Missionary of the Sacred Heart who had arrived in Nicaragua in 1970, joined the FSLN. In a letter dated December 1977, he explained his decision by referring to the Medellin resolution which said: “Revolutionary insurrection can be legitimate in the case of a clear and persistent tyranny which gravely endangers fundamental human rights and greatly harms the common good of the nation, whatever the tyranny originates in one individual or clearly unjust structures.”

In a second letter, in 1978, Father Laviana wrote: “My faith and my belonging to the Catholic Church obliges me to take an active part in the revolutionary process with the FSLN. Because the liberation of oppressed peoples is an integral part of Christ’s total redemption. My active contribution in this process is a sign of Christian solidarity with the oppressed and those who struggle to free them.”

On December 11, 1978, Father Gaspar Garcia Laviana was killed in an encounter with the National Guard. As the crisis of the dictatorship deepened, the Church hierarchy increasingly ignored the increasing numbers of clergy which supported the Sandinistas, particularly youth and poor people - ignored the Archbishops of Leon, Esteli and possibly the world... Our experience has shown that it is possible to be a believer and a committed revolutionary at the same time, and that there is no irreconcilable contradiction between the two.”

A new slogan was born, that the Sandinista crowds would chant again and again: “Entre Cristianismo y Revolucion no hay contradiccion” [Between Christianity and revolution there is no contradiction]!

Of course, not all Christians supported the revolution. The Church was divided (after a short “period of grace”) between those who were, at one time, in Nicaragua, con el proceso (with the revolutionary process upholding after July 1979, and leading to socialists) and those who opposed it. While most bishops became hostile to “communist Sandinismo,” the great majority of the religious orders (in particular the Jesuits and Maryknoll) sided with the FSLN. The Church was divided between the two options, with the greater number supporting the bishops.

Three priests in the government

The most visible Christian figures in the revolutionary camp were of course the three priests who became ministers in the Sandinista Government:

Ernesto Cardenal, born in 1925, was consecrated priest in 1965. As first a follower of the famous American Catholic theologian Thomas Merton - with whom he lived in the Trappist Convent of Gethsemani in Kentucky (1957-1958) - he returned to Nicaragua and founded the community of Soliuramm in 1966. A well-known poet, Cardenal visited Cuba in the early 1970s and became increasingly radical. After the destruction of Soliuramm he went into exile in Costa Rica and joined the FSLN (1977). In 1979 he became Minister of Culture.

Fernando Cardenal, his brother, a Jesuit priest since 1963, lived one year among the poor in Medellin (Colombia) in 1969. In 1970 he was appointed vice-president of the USA in Managua by the Jesusi Order. Founder of the Revolutionary Christian Movement in 1973, he became a sympathizer of the Sandinistas. In 1979 he became the head of the Literacy Crusade, and in 1984 Minister of Education.

Michael Lowey

Marxism and Liberation Theology

2) After the Sandinista victory of July 1979

Something happened in Nicaragua that never happened before: Christians (both lay and clergy) were not only active in the insurgency against Somoza, but participated in the new revolutionary government set up in its wake, along with Marxists. The Sandinista Front acknowledged this novelty in its Declaration on Religion of October 7, 1980: “Christians have been an integral part of our revolutionary history to a degree unprecedented in any other revolutionary movement of Latin America and possibly the world... Our experience has shown that it is possible to be a believer and a committed revolutionary at the same time, and that there is no irreconcilable contradiction between the two.”

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Three priests in the government

The most visible Christian figures in the revolutionary camp were of course the three priests who became ministers in the Sandinista Government:

Ernesto Cardenal, born in 1925, was consecrated priest in 1965. As first a follower of the famous American Catholic theologian Thomas Merton - with whom he lived in the Trappist Convent of Gethsemani in Kentucky (1957-1958) - he returned to Nicaragua and founded the community of Soliuramm in 1966. A well-known poet, Cardenal visited Cuba in the early 1970s and became increasingly radical. After the destruction of Soliuramm he went into exile in Costa Rica and joined the FSLN (1977). In 1979 he became Minister of Culture.

Fernando Cardenal, his brother, a Jesuit priest since 1963, lived one year among the poor in Medellin (Colombia) in 1969. In 1970 he was appointed vice-president of the USA in Managua by the Jesusi Order. Founder of the Revolutionary Christian Movement in 1973, he became a sympathizer of the Sandinistas. In 1979 he became the head of the Literacy Crusade, and in 1984 Minister of Education.
The Historical Institute for Central America
The ACLEN, Association of the Nicaraguan and most...inspired by the old...

Miguel d'Escoto was born in Hollywood, California, in 1933 and educated in the U.S. as a Jesuit. He later joined the Maryknoll nuns in Mexico, where he was a teacher and activist. He was a key figure in the Nicaraguan revolution, serving as a diplomat and political leader.

The ACLEN, Association of the Nicaraguan and most recently inspired by the old...

As a mission leader in Santiago, Miguel Torres, also linked to the pro-Sandinista representation of the Sandinista revolution, organized meetings, conferences, publications, and research projects.

The Historicial Institute for Central America (HICA), led by the Jesuit Alvaro Arguello. In 1980 the Institute of the Central American universities presented a revolutionary perspective, the Folletos Populares (Popular Pamphlets). It also published the widely respected monthly bulletin of information from Cardinal Miguel Obando.

The Nicaraguan...middle classes...this can be seen both...

The revolutionaries...Christianity and...the Primate proclaimed by Tomas Borge...

The Nicaraguan revolution subverted capital punishment and became the first modern victorious revolutionary movement since 1789 without executions, guillotine or firing squibs, even though the government of the Guardia Nacional were only put in jail in order to be "re-educated."

The Nicaraguan revolution did not intend to establish a parallel Church, "a People's Church" separated and opposed to the existing one (led by Monsignor Obando). Although their conception of Church affairs emphasized the pastoral role of the laity and saw the Church as a "historical community of believers" rather than an institution exclusively based on the hierarchical authority of the bishops, they wanted only to secure for themselves a "space" inside the one and only Church.

This historical perspective, however, was not accepted by both the bishops and the Christians committed to it.

At first, the bishops seemed to accept the revolution.

Their statement of November 17, 1979 was astonishingly progressive: it favoured a socialization that would lead to a "true transfer of power toward the popular classes," and that would aim at satisfying the needs of the majority of Nicaraguans through a nationally planned economy. Although it rejected "class hatred," it accepted class struggle as "the dynamic factor...leading to a just transformation of structures." It called for radical social change, beyond "the defense of individual interests, whether large or small." And finally, it proclaimed that "our faith in Jesus and in the God of life...should illuminate the commitment of Christians in the present revolutionary process." (31)

However, after the liberal members of the coalition government (Alfonso Robelo and Violeta Chamorro) broke with the FSLN in April 1980, the bishops turned increasingly against the process. In May 1980 they called on the three priests to leave the government and, during the next few years, engaged in open conflict with the Sandinista Catholic Church. During his visit in 1983 the Pope of course supported the bishops and denounced the "People's Church," ordaining the Cardinal brothers and Miguel d'Escoto to give up their governmental responsibilities. When they refused to comply, they were suspended or expelled from their religious orders (in 1984). In 1985 Monsignor Obando, having just been appointed Cardinal by Rome, travelled to Miami and expressed solidarity with the Contra leaders. Soon after several priests were accused of counter-revolutionary activity by the Government and expelled from the country. However, after a period of negotiations, there have been attempts, in the last two years, to reach a modus vivendi between the Church and the FSLN. In a very skillful move, the Sandinistas chose Monsignor Obando as mediator in their negotiations with the Contra rebels.

Sandinistas and religion
One of the reasons why the conservative bishops were so hostile to the FSLN was the fact that they perceived the fusion between Sandinismo and Christianity as a threat. The friendly overtures of the Sandinista leaders were more frightening for certain bishops (in Managua and Rome) than the kind of atheistic hostility typical of European regimes. As Constanza O'Brien put it in a recent essay:

"With proper Marxist, churchmen knew where they stood: Marxists in one sphere, the Church in quite a different one - a tidy and tenable state of affairs. This new stuff was quite different. What was new in Nicaragua - and most alarmingly new - was that for the first time liberation theology had the backing of a State: a most undesirable precedent for Latin America in particular." (32)

What was indeed the attitude of the Sandinistas (non-believing) Marxists towards revolutionary Christians? According to Father Giusto Girardi, the well-known Italian theologian (known for his interest in Marxism and his support of revolutionary Nicaragua), there are two attitudes among the Sandinistas' cadres:

- the old "orthodox" conception - inspired by the Soviet (or Cuban) handbooks of "Marxism-Leninism": Christians are allies, but not sure ones, because of their faith and their links to the Church. At best the convergence with them takes place in practice, but never in their understanding of the contradiction between Marxism and "ideology" is total. This attitude is often found among recently trained medium-level cadres, without much pre-1979 experience.

- the new, "Nicaraguan" conception - inspired by the concrete experience of common struggle: revolutionary Christians belong to the vanguard. One has to reformulate the traditional Marxist theory of religion and recognize its subversive potential. The convergence with revolutionary Christians is both practical and theoretical, on the question of the liberation of the oppressed. This is the attitude of the main leaders of the FSLN - like Luis Carrion, who insisted in a speech in September 1979; this is not an "alliance" between Marxists and Christians; those who make the whole journey are compromiseros, Sandinistas like the others.

What does it mean to be an orthodox priest? Does Marxism mean the extension and deepening of the revolution - in particular of land reform - and the defense of the gains of the revolution against the Contra rebels and U.S. intervention. But at the same time they want to keep their identity and an open, essentially critical attitude towards the revolutionary leadership.

For instance, in a statement released in June 1985 (Church and Revolution in Nicaragua) the Centro Ecuménico de Antonio Valdivieso wrote:

"We recognize the FSLN as the vanguard of the people...However they can make mistakes, and in these difficult years of transition they often made mistakes, even on very important issues like the Mitropo problem, the land reform, censorship of the press, etc. They also made some mistakes, in our view, in relation to the Church...for Latin America in particular." (34)

In any case, there is no doubt that the Christian component of Sandinismo is one of the reasons for the originality of the Nicaraguan revolution and its force of attraction in the country itself, in Latin America and in the whole world.

31) Quoted in P. Berryman, op. cit., p. 396.
VI. Christianity and the origins of the revolutionary struggle in El Salvador

As in Nicaragua, it was only after the conference of Medellín that things began to change in the Salvadoran Church.

The first communities

Under the influence of the new orientation adopted in 1968 by the Latin American Bishops and of the first writing of Liberation Theologian Jon Sobrino, for instance, of Jon Sobrino, a Basque Jesuit living in El Salvador—a group of priests started missionary work among the poor peasants of the diocese of Aguilares in 1972-1973. The central figure in this group was Father Rutilio Grande, a Salvadoran Jesuit who taught at the seminary of San Salvador, but decided to leave the city to share the life of the rural poor. The priests' missionary team (many of them Jesuits) lived among the peasants and initiated base communities conceived by them as: "A community of brothers and sisters committed to building a new world, with neither oppressors nor oppressed, according to God's plan."

They read the Bible to the peasants and compared their lives to the Hebrew's who were slaves in Egypt under the Pharaoh, but liberated themselves through collective action. An average seven hundred people attended weekly CEB meetings and the circle of those influenced ranged from two to five thousand (35).

In the interior of rural religious sects in the villages, the so-called societies of "Adorers of the Holy Sacrament," whose main activity was to say the rosary, were replaced by Delegates of the Word (like in Nicaragua, also on the initiative of the priests), who read the Bible with the community. The missionaries broke the passivity and alienation of the traditional peasant religion, by explaining that instead of just "adoring" Jesus it was practical to follow his example and struggle against evil in the world, with the poor, against the powerful. They helped the peasants win back their human dignity, and this generated initiative, creativity and the rise of a new leadership elected by the community. And finally they insisted on the importance of fighting the social sin, identified with exploitation and capitalism.

Father Rutilio said in his last homily in 1977: "Our ideal is like the Eucharist, a large common table with room for all. In this country to preach the Gospel is to sacrifice for the poor. If Jesus came to us again, they would call him a rebel, a subversive, a Jewish foreigner, a propaganda of exotic and foreign ideas. They would crucify him."

One month later he was shot by the army.

35. See Universidad Centro Americana, Basilio Grande, matriz de la evangelización rural, San Salvador, 1974.

The religious change brought a political conversion (charged with religious feelings), the "awakening through the Scriptures" led to militant action and "conscientization" fostered the creation of new religious groups, particular the "Farabundo Martí People's Liberation Forces (FPL)" a leftist split from the Communist Party.

Towards trade unionism and politics

One of the Delegates of the Word educated by father Rutilio, Apolinariano Serrano ("Polin") became the president of a new Christian peasant union in 1974 (the Federacion Cristiana de Campesinos del Salvador - FECCAS). Soon FECCAS converged with another peasant union (the Union of the Trabajadores del Campo - UTC), with the teachers union (the Asociacion Nacional de Educadores del Salvador - ANDES) and with students' and pupils' movements to found a communist Revolutionary People's Bloc (Bloque Popular Revolucionario - BPR), which was sympathetic to the guerrilla movement. The main leader of the BPR was Juan Chacón, a young Christian activist and organizer of base communities.

The church hierarchy divided: while the archbishop, Monsignor Romero and the auxiliary bishop, Monseñor Rivera y Damas, denounced the military's repression of popular movements and killing of priests, Father Rutilio said in his last homily in 1977: "Our ideal is like the Eucharist, a large common table with room for all. In this country to preach the Gospel is to sacrifice for the poor. If Jesus came to us again, they would call him a rebel, a subversive, a Jewish foreigner, a propaganda of exotic and foreign ideas. They would crucify him."

But the military kept real power in their own hands, and the rise of a new leadership elected by the community. The missionaries broke the passivity and alienation of the traditional peasant religion, by explaining that instead of just "adoring" Jesus it was practical to follow his example and struggle against evil in the world, with the poor, against the powerful. They helped the peasants win back their human dignity, and this generated initiative, creativity and the rise of a new leadership elected by the community. And finally they insisted on the importance of fighting the social sin, identified with exploitation and capitalism.

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But the military kept real power in their own hands, and the soldiers was supported by local communities who in the end would be attacked and killed by the military. The main leader of the BPR was Juan Chacón, a young Christian activist and organizer of base communities.

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A call to disobedience

Finally, in his homily at the Metropolitan Cathedral on March 23, Monsignor Romero dared to take an unprecedented step: he called on the soldiers not to obey their superiors.

"I would like to make a special appeal to the members of the army... Brothers, each one of you is one of us. We are the same people. The peasants you kill are your own brothers and sisters. When you kill are your own brothers and sisters. When you kill, remember instead the voice of God saying: "Thou Shalt Not Kill!" God's law must prevail. No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. There is still time for you to obey your own conscience, even in the face of a sinful command to kill... (In the name of God, in the name of our conscience, even in the face of a sinful command to kill, remember instead the voice of God saying: "Thou Shalt Not Kill!" God's law must prevail. No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. There is still time for you to obey your own conscience, even in the face of a sinful command to kill. ...) In the name of God, in the name of our tormented people whose cries rise up to Heaven I beseech you, I beg you, I command you, STOP THE REPRESSON!"

The next day he was killed by the death-squad... (40)

Monsignor Romero became an exemplary hero and martyr in the eyes of radical Christians of the whole world. His spiritual and political itinerary shows that change at the grassroots can have an impact among the peasants as well as have a positive influence for students and workers at the university level. It is undeniable that liberation theologians have been attracted by this historical doctrine.

The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

Let us turn the floor over to Cardinal Ratzinger, an eminent Vatican theologian whose political shrewdness cannot be doubted. His answer was this:

"In the 1960's a definite vacuum in meaningfulness came over the Western world... In this situation, various forms of neo-Marxism went through a transformation and took on a moral meaning as well as a promise of significance which proved almost irresistible for university youth... [Furthermore], the moral challenge of poverty and oppression could longer be ignored at a time when Europe and North America had reached a previously unheard-of level of opulence. This challenge obviously required new answers that could not be found in the traditions which had existed until that time. This changed theological and philosophical situation directly stimulated a search for answers in a form of Christianity that would let itself be guided by Marxian philosophers' apparently scientifically grounded models of hope."

The result has been the emergence of liberation theologians who "have adopted the basic Marxist option." The seriousness of the danger presented by this new doctrine is underlined by the fact that it did not fit into any previously existing scheme of heresy; its starting point fell outside what could be grouped with the traditional models of debate.

One cannot deny, the Cardinal recognizes, that the new theology, combining Biblical criticism and Marxist analysis, is "seductive and endowed with a nearly flawless logic," that it seems to answer "both to scientific and moral requirements and contemporary moral challenges." But this only makes it more formidable:

"For an error is all the more dangerous that its kernel of truth is greater." (42)

We know of course that it was only a few months later the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly known as the Holy Office of the Inquisition) published a document signed by its Prefect, Cardinal Ratzinger himself, which, for the first time officially condemned liberation theology as a "deviation."

The main criticism levelled by this Instruction on Some Aspects of "Liberation Theology" against the new Latin American theologians was their use in "an insufficiently critical way" of concepts "borrowed from various currents of Marxist thought." As a result of these concepts - particularly that of the class struggle - the Church of the Poor of the Christian tradition became a liberation church:

"A class-based Church, which has become conscious of the needs of the revolutionary struggle as a stage towards liberation, and celebrates this liberation in its liturgy - which necessarily leads to calling into question the Church's sacramental and hierarchical structure..." (43)

These formulations are patently polemical; nevertheless, it is undeniable that liberation theologians have drawn analyses, concepts and viewpoints from the Marxist theoretical arsenal which play an important role in their understanding of social reality in Latin America. By virtue of a few positive references to certain aspects of Marxism - independent of the content of these references - liberation theology has caused an immense upheaval in the political-cultural field; it has broken a taboo and encouraged a great number of Christians to take a fresh look not just at the theory but also at the practice of Marxism. Even when its approach was critical, it had nothing to do with the traditional anathemas against "atheistic Marxism, the diabolical enemy of Christian civilization" - phrases still current in the speeches of military dictators from Videla to Pincheval.

Break-up of Stalinist monolith

We mentioned earlier the historical (economic, social and political) conditions that have permitted this opening of Catholic culture to Marxist ideas. We should merely add here that Marxism too evolved in that period. There was the break-up of Stalinist monolithism in the wake of the Twentieth Congress of the
Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Sino-Soviet split. In Latin America you also had the role of the Cuban revolution and the end of the Communist Parties’ hegemony. Marxism ceased to be a closed and rigid system, submitted to the ideological authority of Moscow and became once again a thought in motion, open to various interpretations and therefore accessible to all at once (44).

It is difficult to present an overall view of liberation theology’s attitude and positions on Marxism because, on the one hand, there is a very wide range of attitudes—ranging from the cautious use of some elements of integral synthesis—and, on the other hand, a certain change has taken place between the positions expressed in the more radical period of 1968 to 1980 and today’s more mellow (following Rome’s criticisms). That, on the basis of the writings of the most representative liberation theologians (like Gustavo Gutierrez and Bolívar) and of certain episcopal documents, one can identify certain common key reference points.

Gustavo Gutierrez

Certain Latin American theologians (referring to Althusser) refer to Marxism simply as one of the social sciences, to be used in a strictly instrumental way to improve our knowledge of Latin American reality. This is one of the same too wide and too narrow a definition. Too wide because Marxism is not the only social science... Too narrow because Marxism is not a science but is founded choice.

It aims not just to know the world but to change it.

In reality, the interest — what many writers call the “fascination” — of liberation theologians for Marxism is greater and more profound than the mere borrowing of a few analytical concepts for purposes of discovery would suggest.

It also involves values (its communal values), ethical-political choices (its solidarity with the poor, the controversy over the concept of a society without classes or oppression). Gustavo Gutierrez thinks Marxism does not only provide a scientific analysis... but also a utopian aspiration of social change. He criticizes Althusser’s vision of Althusser, who considers “prevents us seeing the profound unity of Marx’s work and consequently of easily understanding its capacity to inspire a radical and permanent revolutionary praxis.” (45)

Which sort of Marxism inspires the liberation theo­logians? Certainly not that of the Soviet dínamas (dialectical materialist) textbooks, nor that of the Latin American Communist Parties. Rather they are attracted to... “Western Marxists” or “Western Marxism” in their documents. In Liberation Theology — Perspective, Gustavo Gutiérrez’s great inaugural work (1971), the critic is Ernesto Bloch. There are also references to Althusser, Marcuse, Lukács, Gramsci, Henri Lefebvre, Lucien Goldman and... Ernest Mandel (counterpointed to Althusser for his better understanding of Marx’s concept of alienation).

But these European references are less important than the Latin American ones: Maratia, as a source of original Marxism... at one and the same time... This is the communal, the ceremonial, and the popular. In the tradition... and the colonization of the generations of the poor (as El Salvador)... this emphasizes the universality of Marxism. Gustavo Gutierrez believes that Marxism is not a science but is founded on choice... a science based on the choice of the poor. This is what makes Marxism so different from other social sciences. The poor have a better understanding of the poor... the liberation theologians have a better understanding of the poor than Marx himself did. This is why Marx is so relevant for the liberation theologians. They see the poor as the agents of social change and not as the objects of it.

The reality of poverty

The starting point for this discovery of Marxism is an unavoidable fact, a brutal mass reality in Latin America: poverty. The liberation theologians perceive the poor as the bearers of the promise of a society that will be different, a society that... the poor have the key role in this change.
of underdevelopment, of growing inequality and military dictatorship was not "feudalism" or insufficient modernization, but the very structure of dependent capitalism. Consequently they argued that some form of social reformation could unlock Latin American futures from dependency and poverty. Certain aspects of this analysis were to be taken up not only by the liberation theologians but also by bishops and episcopal conferences in Brazil.

In May 1980, a group of experts from the U.S. Republican Party prepared a document which was to become a basic political "primer" for the party's presidential candidate, Ronald Reagan, in the next election in Brazil. In the second part of the document, entitled "Internal Subversion", proposition number 3 states: "United States' foreign policy must begin to confront (and not only react after the fact to) social revolutions (1967) that: "

- Develop the economy and modernize the country.
- Play a role is vital for the concept of political liberty.
- Confront (and not only react after the fact to) liberation theology. In Latin America the Church's role is vital for the concept of political liberty. Unfortunately Marxist-Leninist forces have used the Church as a political weapon against private property and the capitalist system of production, infiltrating the religious community with ideas that undermine this commitment to Christianity.

On the other hand, if by "communist ideas" the Republican Party experts mean those of the Communist Parties, then their analysis completely misses what is really going on. The Church of the Poor, inspired in the first place by religious and ethical considerations, displays a much more radical, intransigent and categorial anti-capitalism - since it includes the dimension of material revolution - than the communist's Communist Parties, who still believe in the progressive virtues of the industrial bourgeoisie and the historical "anti-feudal" role of industrial (capitalist) development. One example will suffice to illustrate this paradox. The Brazilian Communist Party explained in its Sixth Congress resolutions (1967) that: "The socialization of the means of production does not correspond to the present level of the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production.

- Industrial capitalism must first develop the economy and modernize the country. However, in 1973, the bishops and superiors of religious orders of the Center-West region of Brazil published a document (The Cry of the Churches) with the following conclusion: "We must overcome capitalism: it is the greatest evil, an accumulated sin, the rotten root, that which produces all the fruit we know so well - poverty, hunger, illness and death. In order to do this it is necessary to go beyond private property of the means of production (factories, land, commerce and banks)." (58)

"Which Marxism? We should not deduce from all this that the liberation theologians of Latin America only support Marxism. As Leonardo and Clodovis Boff emphasize in the answer to Cardinal Ratzinger, Marxism is used as a mediating force for the propagation of the faith: "It has helped clarify and enrich certain major theological notions: people, poor, history and even d'equipes et supérieurs religieux de l'Est-Belgique, Bruxelles : Enseignes et Préjugés, 1973, pp. 42-43.
(50) Gustavo Gutiérrez, Teología de la Liberación - Perspectivas, pp. 202-220. The text from Marxsus is from Ideología e política, p. 249.

Capitalism as structural sin ertanother episodic document is even more explicit. The Declaration of the Bishops of the North East of Brazil (1973) states: "The injustice produced by this society is the fruit of capitalist relations of production which necessarily create a class society characterized by discrimination and injustice. The oppressed class has no other option than to follow the long and difficult road (the journey has already begun) leading to the social ownership of the means of production. This is the foundational principle of the gigantic historical project of the global transformation of present society into a new society in which it becomes possible to create the objective conditions allowing the oppressed to recover their humanity and to "open the doors of the Gospel"... (50)

The document was signed by thirteen bishops (including Dom Helder Camara) and by the Provincial superiors of the Franciscans, Jesuits, Redemptorists and by the Abbot of St Benedict monastery in Bahia. As we can see from these extracts, and from a lot more that have come out of the Christian liberation current - solidarity with the poor leads to a condemnation of capitalism and then to a desire for socialism.

"What sort of socialism? There is a more or less current - solidarity with the poor leads to a resolution adopted by the CELAM Department of Education towards the end of the 1960s: "The Christian religion has been used and is still used as an ideology justifying the rule of the powerful. Christianity in Latin America has not been a functional religion for the system. Its rites, its churches and its work have contributed to channeling the people's dissatisfaction towards the hereafter, totally disconnected from the present world. Thus Christianity has held back the people's protest against an unjust and oppressive system." (54)

"Of course this criticism is made in the name of an authentic evangelical Christianity, in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, and has nothing in common with a materialist questioning of religion as such.

"The Roman and feudal model of authority" ertainly, anyone of the liberation theologians Leonardo Boff has formulated the most systematic and radical criticism of the authoritarian structures of the Catholic Church, from Emperor Constantine to the present day. In his opinion, these structures reflect a Roman and feudal model of authority: pyramidal hierarchy, sanctification of obedience, refusal of any internal criticism. Boff's "irreverence" goes so far as to compare (quoting the writings of a left-wing Brazilian Marxist, Marcos Moreira Leite) the institutional and bureaucratic structure of the Church with that of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union:

"One might expect the party's socialist philosophy, its structures and practices to reveal the logic of any centralizing power. This type of analysis certainly did not please the Vatican, because following the publication of his book Boff was condemned by the Roman ecclesiastical authorities to one year of silence... Having said this, we should note that Boff does not reject the Church as such. He demands its total transformation, its reconstruction from the top down to the poor, by those who live in the "cells of humanity." (55) As these extracts from the theologians' writings and from pronouncements of episcopal conferences show, a significant but minority sector of the Latin America Church has integrated certain basic Marxist ideas into its new understanding of Christianity. Some Christian trade unionists, Christians who are members of left- wing organizations or certain more radicalized movements like Christians for Socialism have a more direct approach of accepting the ideas of Marxism and Christianity. Here we are talking about a Christian current inside the revolutionary movement. Indeed in many countries it is one of the main components of the revolutionary movement.

Questions While liberation theologians have learned a lot from Marxism, do Marxists have anything to learn from them? Certain interesting questions can be posed, both from the theoretical and practical point of view. For example:

- Should one still consider - along with most "textbooks on Marxism-Leninism" - the distinction between "materialism" and "idealism" in the modern form of a fundamental question of philosophy? Is it still possible to contend, as does the Concise Philosophical Dictionary published by famed Soviet academicians P. Joulne and M. Rosenthal, that dialectical materialism was superior to metaphysical materialism which was undeveloped, dead, crude and "idiotic"? (56) Isn't it true that the revolutionary idealism of the liberation theologians is superior to the idiotic materialism of the bourgeois economists and even of certain Stalinist "Marxists"? Particularly since this theological idealism has been shown to be perfectly compatible with a historical

51) Leonardo e Clodovis Boff, "Le cri de la pauvreté", 1984, Théologiques de la Libération, p. 139.
52) G. Gutiérrez, o.c., pp. 117-118.
53) G. Gutiérrez, op.cit., pp. 117-118. In a footnote, Gutierrez mentions several other Latin American episodic documents of similar persuasion.
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materialist approach to social reality...

Why couldn't liberation theology help us combat the reductionist, economistic and vulgar materialist tendencies that exist within the Marxist tradition? We have to take into consideration the role of moral and "spiritual" motivation if we want to understand why a whole layer of middle class intellectuals and individuals (the radicalized clergy) broke with their class and now support the cause of the oppressed. In the same way, to explain why the Christian masses shrug off their agapistic stance and the oppressors' appeal, we have to examine not just their objective social conditions, but also their subjectivity, culture, beliefs and their new way of experiencing their religion. Linking up again with the insulations of Latin American Marxists like Jose Carlos Mariategui, the liberation theologians also help us to re-evaluate certain petitbourgeois communal traditions, kept alive in popular tradition (particularly among the peasants) and to dismiss the blinkered culture of "economic progress," capitalist modernization and the "development of the productive forces" as such. Revolutionary Christians have been more aware of the social consequences of the "development of underdevelopment" under the multinational's domination than many Marxists enamoured in the chains of a purely economistic "development" logic.

In their revolt against the Church's authoritarianism, the Christians for liberation are wary of political authoritarianism in the trade unions and political parties. Their "basest" or "rank-and-file" occasional takes on naive and excessive forms but is an understandable reaction against the anti-democratic, corrupt or manipulative practices of the popular or Stalinist apparatchiks. Correctly formulated, isn't this anti-authoritarian sensitivity and this aspiration to democracy at the base a vital contribution to the self-organization of the oppressed and to an anti-hierarchic reconstruction of the workers movement?

Liberation theologians push us to reflect on the moral dimension of revolutionary commitment, of the struggle against social injustice and of the building of a new society. The Jesuits were deemed in the eyes of the new movement the "front" in the war against the invisible Church. "The end justifies the means." Trotsky in Their Morals and Ours defends them from this accusation and notes that such a doctrine, taken in the strict sense of the term would be "inherently a moral and psychologically absurd." (57) In any case the new revolutionary Jesuits, like Fernando Cardenal, a member of the Sandinista government, have little in common with this type of Machiavellianism: their political commitment is inseparable from certain ethical values. It is to a large extent due to the role of the Sandinista Christians that the Nicaraguan revolution is the first authentic social revolution, since 1789, to have abolished the death penalty. An example to be followed.

Finally liberation theology forces Marxists to re-examine their traditional thinking about religion; while it has played and continues to play in many places the role of the "opium of the people," can it not also act as the tocsin of the people, as a call for the oppressed to awaken from their slumber, their passivity, their fatalism and become aware of their rights, their strength and their future?

What then are the criteria we can raise with the liberation theologians? The most urgent discussion to have with the Christians for liberation are not debates on materialism, religious alienation or on the history of the Church (and even less on the existence of God), but on the obviously practical and burning questions of the day: for example, divorce, abortion, contraception, the right of woman to control their bodies. In fact it is a debate which concerns the whole Latin American workers movement, which is far from having a coherent line on this issue. It is a fact that on questions like the family and sexuality, abortion and birth control, even as a progressive a Christian as Lando cannot agree with the Christian socialist and still defends traditional and backward positions quite close to those preached by the pope. Only the most advanced liberation theologians like Frei Betto accept that abortion should be decriminalized. Nevertheless we can agree that this is a matter of life or death for millions of Latin American women who are still compelled to have illegal abortions with tragic consequences: thousands of deaths Whose current thinking is reflected in the collection of interviews (with Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Bob, Frei Betto, Pablo Richard, Hugo Assmann and others) about this issue published by Elea Tame in 1986. (58) More importantly, Christian women themselves are beginning to speak out and the female voices of women theologians, religious and lay activists - such as Elsa Tamez, Yvonne Cobur, Mara Jose Rosario Nunes, Mara Clara Bingemer - are being heard posing the question of the double oppression of Latin American women, and the multiple forms of discrimination they suffer in society as a whole and in the Church itself.

The problem of a tactical alliance with the so-called Left Christian forces has been part of the concerns of the workers movement and Marxists in Latin America (and elsewhere) for a long time. During his trip to Chile in 1971, Fidel Castro mentioned the possibility of passing from a tactical to a strategic alliance between Marxists and Christians. But today, after the experiences of Brazil, Nicaragua and El Salvador, we should no longer be speaking in terms of an alliance but rather of organic unity. For the Christians are already one of the essential components of the revolutionary movement - and even of its Marxist vanguard - in many countries of Latin America.

We could spend a long time arguing over the philosophical enigma - or the theoretical challenges - of whether Marxist Christianity has any meaning from the point of view of dialectical materialism. What matters though, is what is happening in reality. And the fact is that Christian Marxism exists: they are an undeniable social and political fact. Not only do they exist, but they have often contributed to the revolutionary vanguard a moral seriousness, experience with grass-roots work among the people and a utopian vision which can only enrich its outlook.

The possibility that Christian forces of a mass character will follow this path depends also on the attitude of Marxist non-believers: whether they are sectarian or open, suspicious or willing to listen. Here too the Sandinistas have given us a good example. In an interview he gave in August 1985, Comandante Luis Curr, a member of the National Leadership of the FSLN, commented: "I see no obstacle which should stop Christians, without renouncing their faith, from making their own all the Marxist conceptual tools which are required for a scientific understanding of the social processes and a revolutionary orientation in political practice. In other words, a Christian can be at once a Christian and a perfectly consistent Marxist... In this sense, our experience can teach many lessons. Many Christians have been and are active in the Sandinista Front and some of them are even priests. And I am not speaking here only of rank-and-file militants; some of them are members of the Sandinista Assembly and hold high political responsibilities... I think that certain Marxist vanguards have had a tendency to perceive progressive and revolutionary Christian sectors as an opponent force competing for a fraction of the political following of these parties. I think this is a mistake. Avoiding that mistake is one of the great achievements of the FSLN. We have linked up with the grass-roots structures of the Church, not to pull people out of them, but to integrate them to the Sandinista Front as a stage in its political development, without this meaning in any way that we opposed their participation in Christian institutions. On the contrary, we leave people in those structures so that their higher commitment will be transformed into political action in this environment. We never told them that in joining the FSLN, they had to face the dilemma of the Christian faith or their activity in the Front. If we had posed things in that way, we would have remained a tiny group of activists." (59)

is difficult to forecast the outcome of the conflict between the Vatican and liberation theology, between the conservative Church and the Church of the Poor. It is not excluded that Rome may succeed in reasserting a certain control, particularly in countries like Brazil where the Church has escaped the long reach of the Curia. But it is quite unlikely that the millions of members of base Christian communities, the thousands of priests, male and female religious, theologians, pastoral agents and lay activists inspired by liberation theology will renounce their commitment and abandon the fight for the emancipation of the poor, the exploited and oppressed. In any case, one conclusion seems most likely: in many countries of Latin America the revolution will develop side by side with the participation of the Christians or will not be made at all.


59) "Les chrétiens dans la révolution sandiniste," Intrans, n.° 246, 6 juillet 1987, p.16.
Concepts summon varied images. Evoking the relationship between socialism and Christianity can concern more than one perspective: the one materialist, collectivist and syndicalist; the other spiritualist, personalist, with the Church occupying an important place in social relations. These images, though similarly focused on the means of production, reveal a great mistake: the identification of a social regime with the liberating message announced by Jesus. The long list of the Church's sins should not hide its important role in preserving and defending the cultural and social good and the moral and theological purposes of the people in base communities of the Church. The theologian Hans Küng is right to note that: "The history of the Church is probably a human history: it has been poor, yet so poor, broad yet so narrow, immense yet so petty."

2. Relations between Marxism and Christianity

Marxism is above all a theory of revolution praxis. Nevertheless, some Marxists have tried to turn it into a sort of justifications based on a foundationalist reading that transforms Marx's Engels' and Lenin's works into a new Bible. But Marxism, like every other theory, is not amenable to one interpretation only. Epistemology teaches us that a text is always read in the context of a particular reader. These "lenses" of reality determine the interpretation of the theory. So Marx's work can be read through the lenses of Kautsky's positivist materialism, M. Adler's neo-Kantianism, Gramsci's voluntaristic or Lukacs's historicist Hegelianism, Sartre's existentialism or Althusser's structuralism as well as in the light of Mao Zedong's peasant guerrilla and national liberation, of Jose Carlos Mariategui's Peruvian reality or of the Sandinista people's insurrection. What matters is whether one is using Marxist theory as a tool for the liberation of oppressed people and not as totem or talisman. A fruit of the proletarian struggle, Marxism should always be judged on the basis of that struggle because that is the only way that it will not lose its revolutionary vigor and become an academic abstraction.

In this sense, Marxism and the Marxists cannot ignore the new role of Christianity as a ferment of liberation of oppressed people in Latin America. But to group this revolutionary potential of Christianity, Marxism will have to break with the straitjacket of its objective outlook and recognize the role of human history as part of the history of the human collective. Marxism has overcome its historical tendency and, in the socialist regimes, a certain "metaphysics of the state," and admitting to the relative autonomy of the superstructures. Revolutionary practice burns through the boundaries of these concepts and cannot be accounted for solely by strictly scientific analyses, because it necessarily includes ethical, mystical and utopian dimensions. The advances achieved by the socialist countries and the ideology embodied by the Party cannot subsume all aspect of interpersonal relations and their social and political consequences.

In any case, why should there be a contradiction between the determinants of the human subjectivity and historical materialism? As the determinant of the last analysis, the economic sphere, it cannot be the result of the complex formed by the productive forces and relations of production. It is these relations of production that determine the nature of the productive forces. To speak of the relations of production in the "first analysis" one finds also class relations, the revolutionary activity of the ruled classes whose consciousness and practice are determinate in the economic sphere. One is using Marxist theory as a tool for the liberation of oppressed people. Human subjectivity and purposefulness is to attempt to reduce Marxism to a purely scientific theory, to fall under the spell of a sort of neo-Hegelianism which would submit the march of history to the control of an absolute and universal reason. The richness and originality of Marxist theory lies precisely in that it is linked to revolutionary practice — which, as it unfolds, confirms or challenges the theory which inspired and inspired it. Without this dialectical relation between theory and practice, Marxism would ossify into an academic orthodoxy easily manipulated by those who wield the machinery of power.

This primacy of practice has led Marxists to recognize that their conception of religion is sometimes religious, in the sense of dogmatic, cut off from practical life. To avoid that pitfall and in light of what is happening in Latin America today, the Second Congress of the Cuban Communist Party approved a resolution which states: "The significant process by which Christian groups and organizations, including Catholic and other clergy members have actively and massively joined the struggles for national liberation and social justice of the peoples of Latin America, as in Nicaragua, El Salvador and elsewhere, as well as the growth of ecumenical institutions and centers which carry on decidedly progressive activities and encourage the political commitment and unity in struggle of revolutionary Christians and Marxists on behalf of deep social transformations throughout the continent, have demonstrated the importance of fostering the successive consolidation of the common front for the indispensable structural transformations of our homeland and the whole world."

The greatest advance in the relations between Christianity and a people's regime is currently taking place in Nicaragua where the enormous majority of the population of the country have actively participated in the liberation process. This fact alone is sufficient to reject the axiomatic notion that some have given to the assertion that "religion is the opium of the people." This is why, also for...
the first time in history, a revolutionary party in power - the Sandinista National Liberation Front - has issued an official statement on religion (October 1980) which says:

"Some authors have asserted that religion is a mechanism of human alienation used to justify the exploitation of one class by another. This assertion undeniably contains a certain validity, for religion has provided the theoretical support for political rule in various historical periods. It is enough to recall the role of the missionaries in the process of conquest and colonization of the Indians of our country. Nevertheless, we, the Sandinistas, state in the light of our own experience that when Christians inspired by their own faith are able to realize their faith and their ideals in the name of God, these beliefs lead them to a revolutionary commitment. Our experience shows that one can at once a believer and a consistent revolutionary and that there is no contradiction between these two things."

False certainties are therefore being overthrown by historical practice. In the last twenty years, in Third World countries, particularly in Latin America, Christianity has revealed its liberating character as the expression of the resistance and struggle of the oppressed. Moreover, all the academic predictions, religion has not disappeared in the socialist regimes. On the contrary, the Churches now constitute an important source of information and strength for the people. The very denial is a further confirmation. The oppressed masses of workers, peasants and the many underemployed are growing aware of this and progressively feeling a new desire for liberation. The ruling class has no other way to isolate itself than to continue the journey which has already begun along the long and difficult path which leads to social ownership of the means of production. This is the main foundation of a gigantic historic perspective of global transformation of present society into socialist society. It will make it possible to create the objective conditions for the transformation of the human life for which they have been deposed, to shed the chains of their suffering, to build the future and, finally, to conquer freedom."

"I have heard the cries of My People, Document of Bishops and Religious Superiors of Northeastern Brazil, May 5, 1972.

Marxists and Christians share more archetypes than our vain philosophy would allow. One of these is the utopia of human happiness in the historical future - a hope which becomes mystical in the practice of many activists who do not fear to sacrifice their own life. Marx calls this fullness the realm of freedom and of overcoming all human suffering."

"The realm of freedom begins where labor is no longer determined by necessity and external compulsion; the individual is treated, of necessity, beyond the borders of material production."

Yet nothing in politics or history can guarantee the fulfillment of this utopia for socialism hoped for by Christians has no historical explanation, being a gift of God. But there is deep in our selves, the desire common to countess Marxists and Christians to see humanity free from all material conditions that divide and separate human beings. And the irresistible hope that the future will be like a table set for all sharing fraternally plentiful bread and the joy of wine."

"The road that leads to a world of freedom, overcoming prejudice and fostering unity, will certainly not be that of theoretical discussions, but that of real commitment to the liberation struggle of the oppressed."

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The emergence of revolutionary Christianity and liberation theology in Latin America opens a new chapter and poses exciting new questions which cannot be answered without a renewal of the Marxist analysis of religion, Löwy writes. One of the best illustrations of this observation is the following dialogue, reported by Frei Betto, between himself and the policeman of the Brazilian dictatorship in charge of his interrogation:

- How can a Christian collaborate with a communist?
- For me, men are not divided into believers and atheists, but between oppressors and oppressed, between those who want to keep this unjust society and those who want to struggle for justice.
- Have you forgotten that Marx considered religion to be the opium of the people?
- It is the bourgeoisie which has turned religion into an opium of the people by preaching a God, lord of the heavens only, while taking possession of the earth for itself.