

Article

The Alleged Decline of Liberation Theology: Natural Death or Attempted Assassination?

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Abstract: Is liberation theology dead or in decline? This article analyzes factors that have led to that perception and provides evidence to the contrary. It demonstrates that the theology has survived multiple attempts by certain sectors of both church and state to eliminate it, and that it remains very much alive in grassroots pastoral programs and social movements. Support for this last statement is provided by the author's field research in Brazil. The article concludes with signs that liberation theology will endure as it continues to inspire spiritually motivated people who commit themselves to addressing human needs by promoting social justice.

Keywords: liberation theology; preferential option for the poor; base communities; social justice; decline; future; Latin America; Brazil

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1. Introduction

The theology of liberation emerged in the early 1970s with the publication of a book by that title by Gustavo Gutiérrez (1971). The central idea of this theology is that the biblical commandment to love one's neighbor requires working to transform social structures that have confined countless numbers of people to lives of dehumanizing poverty. For the next twenty years, this belief would inspire the work of theologians and pastoral workers, as well as generating a considerable body of social science research.

Then in the 1990s, the word began to spread that the theology had failed and was in decline or dying. This article summarizes the factors that created this perception and presents an argument to the contrary. It provides evidence that, rather than suffering decline and natural death, liberation theology has survived multiple assassination attempts by sectors of the Roman Catholic Church and several governments, especially their military branches.

2. Social Science Research

The early literature on this subject focused on changes within institutional Catholicism,¹ specifically a shift by bishops from support of the status quo to the encouragement of new pastoral initiatives among poor people and advocacy for social justice. The earliest manifestations of this institutional shift were in Brazil and Central America (Adriance 1986; Berryman 1984, 1987; Bruneau 1974, 1982; De Kadt 1970; Della Cava 1976, 1988; Gómez de Souza 1982; Lancaster 1988; Mainwaring 1986; Ribeiro de Oliveira 1981). Researchers also studied comparative cases in Chile, Peru, Argentina, Colombia, and Venezuela (Dodson 1974; Levine 1981; Romero 1989; Smith 1982).

Although this new perspective came to be known as "liberation theology", it was more than an academic discipline. It was also a practical pastoral approach called "the preferential option for the poor" and was applied in pastoral programs among landless farmers and other marginalized people, as well as base ecclesial communities (CEBs). The latter are small groups, mainly subdivisions of parishes, that come together to celebrate liturgies, prepare people for sacraments, and study the bible. Because bible discussions include critical reflection on people's experiences of poverty, they sometimes lead to community action and the formation of social movements (Adriance 1995; Burdick 2004; Levine 2012).

The early researchers appeared to be in agreement that liberation theology represented a significant change in Latin American Catholicism that was likely to persist in the foreseeable future. However, they would later become divided in their opinions about its persistence. Some believed that it was dying or in decline (Drogus 1999; Hagopian 2009; Hewitt 1993; Mackin 2015; Nagle 1997), while others maintained that it continued to influence grassroots movements among workers, landless farmers, black people, women, and homeless people (Apolinário de Lira 2019; Burdick 2004; French 2007; Levine 2012). Several factors contributed to this divergence in interpretations of the situation.

3. The Impression of Death

3.1. Actions by the Vatican

The main factor that helped to create the scenario of the death of liberation theology was retrenchment on the part of the Vatican during the long papacy of Pope John Paul II from 1978 to 2005 (Burdick 1993; Cousineau 1997; Drogus 1999; Fleet and Smith 1997; French 2007; Hewitt 1993; Peña 1995).² This pontiff appointed as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith the ultra-conservative Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who would later serve the church as Pope Benedict XVI from 2005 to 2013. Over a total of thirty-five years, these popes promoted policies of censuring liberation theologians (especially Leonardo Boff and Gustavo Gutiérrez), replacing retired progressive bishops with more conservative ones, and prohibiting political involvement of any kind for people identified with the church.

The norm against political involvement did not appear to apply to Pope John Paul's special relationship with President Ronald Reagan (Kengor 2017; Lernoux 1989) or to communication between the U.S. State Department and the Vatican that occurred during the papacies of both John Paul II and Benedict XVI (Kovalik 2013). Evidence of connections between the U.S. government and the Vatican will be described in Section 4.

3.2. Myopic View from São Paulo

A second source of the impression of decline was the view of social scientists who focused their research on the Archdiocese of São Paulo in Brazil (Drogus 1999; Hewitt 1993), where the late Cardinal-Archbishop Paulo Evaristo Arns instituted top-down innovations. The archbishop sold his palatial residence and used the money to construct approximately 600 community centers on the urban periphery, where the majority of poor people lived. Each of these buildings served several base communities. This action convinced CEB members that the church strongly supported the preferential option for the poor. However, in 1989, that impression was severely weakened when the Vatican subdivided the archdiocese and appointed conservative bishops to head the new dioceses, mainly in poor areas (Hewitt 1993). People became demoralized, base community membership decreased, and remaining members became more focused on religious piety to the exclusion of social activism. It is important, however, not to exaggerate the extent to which the cause of this demoralization in CEBs was purely religious. The social context at that time also had an impact on activism. Base communities had flourished in the 1980s, when the political opening in Brazil provided the opportunity for activism of all kinds. Then in the 1990s, there was a crisis in urban social movements. As people became discouraged about the lack of improvement in their economic conditions, participation in those movements decreased. This author found that this happened even in a diocese with a progressive bishop (Cousineau 2003). This diocese was located on the periphery of an urban area. In rural areas, on the other hand, where there were continuing struggles for land reform, pastoral efforts related to liberation theology remained a vital force in people's religious lives and in their work for social justice (Adriance 1995; Burdick 2004; French 2007). Researchers who limited their studies to urban communities did not see this vitality.

3.3. Characterization of Liberation Theology as a Social Movement

A third factor in the erroneous reports of the death of liberation theology is its characterization as a social movement, rather than as a religious phenomenon that helped

to generate secular mobilization, such as the Movement of the Landless (Burdick 2004; Wright and Welford 2003) and the National Movement of the Street Population Cousineau 2020). The view of the theology as a social movement may have been the result of the publication of an influential book that reflected that view (Smith 1991). By definition, a social movement is a form of collective action that aims to promote or resist change in a society. If liberation theology is a change-oriented social movement, it clearly has failed. Fifty years after its emergence, poverty continues to persist in Latin America. However, if we view liberation theology not as a social movement, but as a *religious* one (Hadden 2000; Levine 2022), it has succeeded. It helped to institutionalize change within the church, specifically the option for the poor and the base communities, which are still officially approved by the Council of Latin American Bishops.

3.4. Exaggerated Expectations

A fourth factor is exaggerated expectations (Levine 2012). In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a considerable amount of interest in liberation theology, which was reflected in the publication of numerous books and articles, a proliferation of university courses, and conferences devoted to the subject. However, the retrenchment by church authorities led to disillusionment. Because people had previously over-estimated the impact of the theology, they would now exaggerate its decline.

All these factors need to be understood in the context of the frontal assault on liberation theology.

4. Attempted Assassination

“Assassination attempt” is a phrase that frequently came up in the course of this author’s research in Northern Brazil (Adriance 1995). Church-based activists would talk about close relatives, friends, or acquaintances who had been killed because of their support of the mobilization of poor people. Sometimes they would also mention death threats or actual attempts on their own lives. Because these people were identified with liberation theology or base communities, it seems appropriate to apply the concept of attempted assassination to the theology itself, especially given the evidence to support this idea. However, before examining the evidence of violent attacks on church people by military governments, it is important to look at the assault that came from within the church itself.

4.1. Religious Reaction against Change

To understand this religious assault, we need to take a closer look at the developments against which it was a reaction and which began long before the term “liberation theology” came to be known. The 1950s and 1960s were a time of pastoral innovations that began with efforts to prevent peasant farmers and factory workers from becoming communist (Adriance 1986). However, despite this initially conservative motivation, the new programs would develop their own change-oriented dynamic. Religious sisters, lay people and priests who worked in these grassroots pastoral programs came to believe that the Gospel required them to work among the poor. Father Helder Câmara, a Brazilian priest who would later become an influential bishop, saw the need to gain the support of the Latin American hierarchy for these grassroots initiatives. In 1955, he had helped to organize the Council of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) and served as its general secretary from 1963 to 1966. In that capacity, he was instrumental in organizing the general conference that took place in 1968 in Medellín, Colombia. The goal was to apply the recommendations for church renewal of the Second Vatican Council to Latin America. It was at this conference that the bishops signed documents establishing the church’s commitment to the preferential option for the poor and opened the way for liberation theology and the base communities. However, the reaction against Medellín soon followed.

One of the strongest opponents was the Colombian Bishop Alfonso López Trujillo, who became the general secretary of CELAM in 1972, and in that position led the charge against liberation theology. He organized another general conference in Puebla, Mexico in 1979

(McGovern 1989). Although the progressives were able to maintain their influence there, reaffirming support of the preferential option for the poor and advocating the continued development of base communities, the conservatives did not cease in their efforts to defeat liberation theology.

After Cardinal Karol Wojtyla became Pope John Paul II, he chose López Trujillo as one of his informants on Latin America and named him Archbishop of Medellín in 1979 and a Cardinal in 1983. López Trujillo maintained contact with Cardinal Ratzinger, as did the conservative Archbishop Eugênio Sales of Rio de Janeiro. Sales urged Ratzinger to take action against Leonardo Boff, which resulted in the silencing of the theologian in 1985 (McGovern 1989). For nearly a year “Boff was not allowed to write, teach, edit any publication, or speak in public” (Lernoux 1989, p. 109).

Ratzinger wrote two “Instructions” on liberation theology in 1984 and 1986. The first one stated that liberationism reduced faith to politics, adopted Marxism uncritically, and undermined church authority (the last point likely referring to disagreements between the grassroots, or “popular”, church and conservative bishops). The second Instruction emphasized spiritual freedom over this-worldly liberation (McGovern 1989).

Meanwhile, the Vatican was appointing anti-liberationist bishops throughout Latin America. By the time of the 1994 CELAM conference in Santo Domingo, it seemed that the opponents of liberation theology might triumph. The final document emphasized individual holiness rather than social justice, and base communities were scarcely mentioned (Cousineau 1997). However, the perception of triumph over liberation theology is accurate only if one defines church in terms of the hierarchy, excluding people at the grassroots level. During this time, pastoral activity at that level continued in places as disparate as remote rural areas and the south-central Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte (French 2007; Cousineau 2020). The relationship of grassroots pastoral activity to rural movements for land reform was mentioned above. The liberationist work in Belo Horizonte will be described in Section 6.

4.2. Military Assaults on Liberation Theology

Beginning in the 1970s, there were increasing reports of murders of priests, bishops, and members of base communities (Berryman 1984; Lernoux 1980). Later, religious sisters were also targets (Berryman 1994). These were results of a strategy by Latin American governments named “The Banzer Plan”, after the Bolivian dictator Hugo Banzer (Berryman 1987; Lernoux 1980). This plan originated in 1975 within his country’s Interior Ministry, which was known to be closely linked to the CIA, and had the following elements:

1. Intensification of internal splits in the church;
2. Harassment of progressive church leaders;
3. Arrest or expulsion of foreign missionaries;
4. Attempts to discredit these missionaries with propaganda emphasizing “that they have been sent to Bolivia for the exclusive purpose of directing the Church toward communism” (Lernoux 1980, p. 143).

The Banzer Plan was presented to the Third Congress of the Latin-American Anti-Communist Confederation (CAL) in Asunción, Paraguay in March 1977. The other Latin American governments that were CAL members adopted the plan (Berryman 1987; Lernoux 1980). These included Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Paraguay. The attack by CAL on the Catholic Church was an essential part of the Doctrine of National Security, which was derived from courses given to Latin American officers by the U.S. military (Lernoux 1980). This doctrine considered challenges to the status quo to be communist subversion, and it helped to generate authoritarian regimes throughout Latin America. In all of the CAL member countries, military and paramilitary groups violently attacked progressive church people and base community members (Berryman 1984; Calder 2004; Della Cava 1988; Fleet and Smith 1997; Lernoux 1980; Levine 1992; Morello 2015; Phillips 2015).

Not all of the attacks were overtly violent. The military strategists in the United States and Latin America were aware that too much repression would generate strong resistance. So, they advocated the use of propaganda, or what they called “counterpropaganda”, given their view of liberation theology as communist propaganda. This has been documented by researchers with differing political views.³ Ulrich Duchrow, a theology professor and social justice advocate, analyzed documents from a conference of Latin American armies held in Argentina in 1987 (Duchrow 1990). The documents presented liberation theology as an instrument of the International Communist Movement and proponents of the theology and CEB members as communist agents. They advocated dealing with dissent by means of psychological operations (psyops), which include fear and propaganda.

Similar information was provided by an author with views opposite to Duchrow’s. Jennifer Marshall, a researcher with the Heritage Foundation, who portrays Christian liberationists as more Marxist than Christian, advocates using religion as counterpropaganda (Marshall 2009). She provides as an example the way that the Catholic Church and the U.S. government sought to discredit Christians who participated in the Sandinista revolution. Marshall notes that the Nicaraguan bishops spoke out against the Sandinistas, and refers to Pope John Paul’s public reprimand of Father Ernesto Cardenal (described in more detail in Section 4.3). She also states that the U.S. government, for its part, “magnified their message around the world ... facilitating as much media exposure as possible” (Marshall 2009, p. 114).

If conservative analysts claim that liberationist Christians are instruments of the International Communist Movement, one might also suggest that conservative members of the Catholic hierarchy could be considered instruments of the U.S. government. The next section will examine the connection between Pope John Paul II and President Reagan.

4.3. *The Combined Assault by Church and State*

The relationship between the president and the pope is another subject that has been documented by authors with opposing political perspectives, leading them to be either critical of that relationship or enthusiastic about it. Political scientist Paul Kengor (2017) is an enthusiastic researcher. He indicates that the two men were united by several factors:

1. Their opposition to communism;
2. Their common experience of having been seriously wounded in assassination attempts and their conviction that their survival meant that they were to carry out a divine plan related to ending communism;
3. Devotion to Our Lady of Fatima—a one-page note in the Reagan Presidential Library indicated that the Fatima story was relevant to the president’s views on communism;
4. Their friendship—Kengor quotes Reagan as actually saying that the pope was his best friend.

Regarding that last point, in 1989 Reagan received a visit from Chris Zawitkowski, head of the Polish–American Foundation for Economic Research and Education, and two men from Poland who were political candidates. In the course of the conversation, “the former president pointed to a picture of Pope John Paul II that hung on his office wall. ‘He is my best friend,’ Reagan told the Poles. ‘Yes, you know I’m Protestant, but he’s still my best friend’” (Kengor 2017, p. 386).

One fact, however, casts doubt on the genuineness of this friendship, and that is the way it began. In an article written three years after the book that is the source of the above quote, Kengor revealed an incident, in June of 1979, when Reagan saw a television broadcast of the new pope’s visit to Poland. As he watched the enthusiastic crowd greeting the pontiff, Reagan became very excited.

“That’s it!!” Reagan had shouted at his television as he and close aide Richard Allen watched the remarkable news footage of the son of Poland’s visit to Warsaw. “The Pope is the key! The Pope is the key!” Reagan told Allen, a Catholic, that he

needed to win the presidency and they needed to reach out to this new Polish pope and the Vatican and “make them an ally”. (Kengor 2020)

This incident occurred a year and a half before Reagan became president and three years before he met the pope, at which time Kengor appeared to present their special bond as developing spontaneously because of shared interests, experiences, and spiritual beliefs. The passage just quoted might cast doubt about this spontaneity. Long before meeting the pope, the president saw him as key to his political goals. Reagan further advanced those goals in 1984 by establishing an embassy at the Vatican. There was clearly an imbalance in the relationship between the U.S. government and the Catholic Church, with the government holding the greater advantage.

For Kengor, the most important part of the Reagan–John Paul relationship was their shared commitment to ending Soviet communism. Their personal bond strengthened that goal. However, there is no mention in his book of their shared opposition to liberation theology.

The viewpoint of the late Penny Lernoux (1989) was the opposite of Kengor’s. She did not express enthusiasm for the bond between the pope and the president. Lernoux, a journalist who had spent many years in Latin America and identified with progressive Catholicism, noted that both men opposed the Sandinista government of Nicaragua because they perceived liberation theology as a wedge for Marxist revolution, which the pope opposed for religious reasons related to his experiences in Poland (Lernoux 1989). Although Reagan claimed to share the pope’s religious sympathies, left-leaning Americans were more likely to attribute the president’s position to a commitment to maintaining capitalist hegemony in Latin America. Neither the pope nor the president acknowledged any differences between Soviet communism and liberation theology, apparently viewing them as equally dangerous evils that should be eliminated.

The consequences of their identification of liberation theology with communism were painful for liberation theologians and the progressive sector of the Latin American church in general and particularly disastrous for Nicaragua. During the pope’s visit to that country in 1983, the Sandinista leaders had made every effort to ensure that everything would go smoothly. However, the pope thwarted them right upon his arrival at the airport (Lernoux 1989). In the incident briefly mentioned by Marshall (in Section 4.2), when Ernesto Cardenal, priest, poet, and Minister of Culture in the government, knelt to kiss his ring, the pope pulled his hand away and shook his finger at Father Cardenal, admonishing him to regularize his situation.

The scene showing Cardenal in tears was televised nationwide, causing anger everywhere. Cardenal was not only a hero of the revolution but also the most famous living poet of a country where poets are held in the highest esteem. For many the pope’s rebuke signified the humiliation of the revolution as well as a beloved priest. (Lernoux 1989, p. 60)

It is worth noting that Marshall saw the worldwide broadcast of this incident to be a useful counterpropaganda device for the U.S. government, but according to Lernoux’s account, it had a very different effect locally. Given that most of the supporters of the Sandinista revolution were Catholic and many of them were especially devout Catholics (Lancaster 1988), this incident resulted in a tension between their loyalty to their church and allegiance to leaders who had liberated them from a long dictatorship. When the pope celebrated an outdoor mass attended by 700,000, people were hoping for affirmation for their victory against the dictatorship and comfort in their grieving for sons and daughters killed by the U.S.-funded contras. Instead, the pope launched into a tirade against the popular church. When people shouted, “We want peace!”, the pope demanded silence, but did not get it. Later Daniel Ortega pleaded with the pope for understanding, without success. Upon the pope’s return to Rome, he instructed Cardinal Ratzinger to write the first of the two Instructions on liberation theology. That document became a diatribe against the grassroots church in Nicaragua (Lernoux 1989).

Meanwhile, President Reagan continued funding the contras as they killed men, women, and children in Nicaragua (Kinzer 1986; Wilkinson 1986), while Pope John Paul II, who spoke frequently of human rights and the sacredness of human life, did nothing to discourage his friend from promoting the bloodshed. Lernoux's book contains multiple references to the impact of the violence of the contras. However, Kengor's book does not mention this.

5. Continued Signs of Life in Liberation Theology

Despite attempts by both religious and political forces to put an end to liberation theology, it continues to show signs of life. One such sign is that it helped to create a generation of religiously committed lay leaders who continue to act through progressive social movements (Apolinário de Lira 2019; Burdick 2004; Cousineau 2020; French 2007; Levine 2012). Another sign noted by Brazilian sociologists is the continued vitality of base communities (Gómez de Souza 2000; Lesbaupin 2000). Most recently, the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI opened the way for a new kind of religious leader, a pope from Latin America who understands the struggles of people in that region, has a personal memory of a violent right-wing military regime, and does not confuse liberation theology with communism. Liberation theologians experience encouragement and support from Pope Francis (Bingemer 2016). This papal support also has an impact on pastoral agents working at the grassroots level, who know that their actions are now in line with church policy.

Although early reports suggested that Pope Francis was opposed to liberation theology, that assessment turned out to be erroneous. The confusion resulted from his support for the "theology of the people". Because the latter avoids a Marxian analysis of class inequality, it might appear to be in opposition to liberation theology. However, this view has been refuted by recognized experts in both camps. Juan Carlos Scannone (2015), known for his work in the theology of the people, denies any opposition to liberation theology, and liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez has stated that the two simply have "different accents" within a single theology. The positive attitude of Pope Francis toward liberation theology was demonstrated in his welcoming Gutiérrez to the Vatican shortly after his election as pope (Kirchengessner and Watts 2015). This pontiff has also breathed new life into the Council of Latin American Bishops. In preparing for the 2021 CELAM conference in Mexico City, Pope Francis called for the conference to be open for the first time to people other than bishops, who would make up only 20 percent of the participants. He also urged the participants to listen to the poor (San Martín 2021).

6. A Case Study in Brazil

This author's field research (Cousineau 2020) provides a case study of the continued vitality of liberation theology. In Brazil there are a number of "social pastorals", church programs that reach out to homeless people, landless farmers, urban workers, black and indigenous people, prisoners, marginalized women, elders, youth, parents of young children, and people with disabilities. These programs provide to varying degrees opportunities for both individual empowerment and social activism. One program that stands out for its activism is the Pastoral of the Street. It is especially noteworthy because it has resulted in the political mobilization of homeless people, a sector of the population that most activists consider impossible to organize.

The Pastoral of the Street began in 1987, around the very time that liberation theology was supposedly beginning its decline. That year, two religious sisters arrived in the city of Belo Horizonte, where they were welcomed by Archbishop Serafim Fernandes Araújo. One of the sisters described this meeting in an interview:

We went to talk with Dom Serafim, and we brought a letter from Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns of São Paulo, introducing us, and we asked to talk with him. We wanted to begin work with the street population . . . He agreed. He said it was fine. And actually he was a very effective presence . . . But [the pastoral] was constructed at the grassroots level, together with the people.

Dom Serafim was not one of the famous progressive bishops. He was more of a moderate, that is, part of a large sector of the episcopate who do not actively promote liberation theology but do not impede grassroots religious initiatives. It was in their dioceses that some of the most long-lasting pastoral innovations occurred (Cousineau 2003, 2020).

After gaining the trust of the archbishop, the sisters went to work to win the trust of street dwellers, although this took a great deal of time and patience. A woman who had been homeless at that time and survived by collecting scrap paper and other recyclable materials told of her initial mistrust of the sisters:

It was difficult for us to accept the pastoral. We thought that they were also police, that they were coming to take away our materials. But it was the pastoral that brought the paper collectors dignity and citizenship.

The sisters began by sitting down on the ground with the paper collectors and listening to them as they told the stories of their lives. This is an approach that continues more than thirty years later, as revealed by a woman who directs one of the regional offices of the pastoral:

We go to the streets where the people are. Then we get to know them. For example, we go every Monday to the area around the bus terminal. And then we approach people. We chat with them. And we listen.

A similar experience was evident in an interview with a religious brother who spends a large part of his time on the street:

It's that approach of *convivência* [shared living experience]. It's not just to go, look, and return home, but a matter of being present, being together with them, seeing their situations, hearing about their situations, and walking with them.

The process described in these interviews enabled street dwellers to develop an understanding of the causes of their hardships, and to strategize about ways to overcome the situation. One of the first projects organized with the help of the pastoral was a recycling cooperative. The people who scavenged for scrap materials experienced frequent harassment by police. This was described by the previously quoted woman:

The police would come after us . . . They would take away the [recyclable material] that for us was always a means of work for income . . . Then the Pastoral of the Street appeared. If it hadn't been for the pastoral, we, the collectors, would no longer exist.

The cooperative not only provided a safe place for street dwellers to bring their materials, but it also brought them increased income by enabling them to bypass the middlemen in the recycling industry. From the pastoral's mobilization of street people, two social movements emerged: the National Movement of Collectors of Recyclable Materials (MNCR) in 2001 and the National Movement of the Street Population (MNPR) in 2005. Although these movements are legally autonomous from the Catholic Church, people in them have close ties with the Pastoral of the Street. The MNPR is especially close to the pastoral because its national headquarters is in the pastoral's own small building and there is mutual consultation between the leadership of the two organizations. However, even though people in the pastoral engage with movement leaders in discussions about politics and public policy, their own orientation is religious. As one of the sisters explained:

All of that is based on a spirituality that comes from the theology of liberation. It comes from the base ecclesial communities, where, beginning with the Gospel, beginning with the Bible, you reflect on the life of the people. So for us, the people of the street are the people of God, who are making the journey in the desert, who are doing this process of liberation.

This liberationist orientation, which unifies spirituality with social justice, is also evident in the religious activities of the Pastoral. One especially vivid example is the Good Friday ritual—a procession of the Stations of the Cross on the streets of Belo Horizonte

that this author observed. At each station people stopped, prayed, sang a hymn, and gave testimony based on their own experiences, for example, as homeless or formerly homeless people, as women, or as victims of violence. They also linked the crucifixion of Jesus to more recent martyrs, such as Sister Dorothy Stang, a missionary who was murdered in the Amazon because of her environmental activism and organizing of poor farmers.

Both interviews and direct observations of the activities of the Pastoral of the Street made it clear that the people who perform this work are inspired by liberation theology. Their words and actions show where this theology is very much alive.

7. Testimony from an Unexpected Source

While some scholars were taking for granted that liberation theology was dying, an affirmation of its resilience came from an unexpected source—the U.S. State Department. This was revealed by Daniel Kovalik, who teaches International Human Rights at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law. Through a Wikileaks search for the term “liberation theology” he discovered thirty-one cables sent to the Vatican from various U.S. embassies dealing with issues in ten different countries, along with the U.S. embassy at the Vatican (Kovalik 2013). Many of these cables reveal a considerable amount of communication between the embassies and the Vatican with regard to liberation theology, including expressions of concern about its resilience. Although Kovalik paraphrases or summarizes several of the cables, there are two direct quotes that are relevant to the present discussion. Both messages were sent during the papacy of Pope Benedict XVI and the presidency of George W. Bush.

One cable was sent to the Vatican in May 2007 from the U.S. embassy in Brazil, just prior to Pope Benedict’s visit to that country:

Another major contextual issue for the visit is the challenge to the traditional Church played by liberation theology. Pope John Paul (aided by the current pope when he was Cardinal Ratzinger) made major efforts to stamp out this Marxist analysis of class struggle. It had come to be promoted by a significant number of Catholic clergy and lay people . . . To a large extent, Pope John Paul II beat down “liberation theology”, but in the past few years, it has seen a resurgence in various parts of Latin America.

A cable sent in January 2008 from the U.S. embassy at the Vatican appears to be analyzing Pope Benedict’s own views:

Also important—and disturbing—to the Holy See is the resilience of Latin American liberation theology. During his time as the powerful Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the 1980s and 1990s, the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger opposed liberation theology for its overt sympathy for revolutionary movements. Some of the supporters of this theology—including former clerics—now occupy prominent political positions in countries like Bolivia and Paraguay, a phenomenon that one commentator has described as the secular reincarnation of liberation theology.

Although there is much to ponder about this close communication between political and religious leaders, the most significant statements in these cables are those that appear to be lamenting the resilience of liberation theology. It would seem that these State Department officials were dismayed that, despite all attempts to “beat down” liberation theology, it actually has a future.

8. The Future of Liberation Theology

Before offering predictions about the future of liberation theology, it is important to note that religion, in addition to being a social institution, is a system of meanings. People experience their lives and actions, both personal and socio-political, in the context of a worldview that is meaningful to them and that legitimizes their actions. Liberation theology is a worldview that provides this kind of orientation to the people who identify with it.

For those who experience poverty or oppression related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, political repression, or the destruction of the natural resources on which they depend for survival, liberation theology provides spiritual and moral support for their struggles against systemic inequality. This belief system also provides support for people from more privileged classes who work as pastoral agents, helping to mobilize oppressed people in their struggles. It strengthens the resolve of those agents when they come up against religious or civil authorities that oppose their actions, as well as reinforcing their beliefs in contexts where the authorities support them.

People's beliefs have an impact on the broader social context. This was evident in the most recent presidential elections in Brazil and Chile, two of the countries where liberation theology first emerged and where the left-of-center candidates were victorious. Although it is common for religious leaders to congratulate the winning candidate, the statements by bishops in those two countries highlighted the importance of policies that help the poor. In Brazil, the campaign of President Lula da Silva was strongly supported by progressive Christians. He narrowly defeated the incumbent, Jair Bolsonaro, a former military officer who was supported by conservative evangelicals. In the context of providing a religious meaning system to both oppressed people and their allies, liberation theology continues to grow and evolve. From the theologians' early focus on class inequality, they have developed analyses of other forms of oppression. Feminist theology and black theology have emerged in several countries (Bingemer 2016; Burdick 2004; Falcon 2008; Gebara 2007; Mackin 2015). There has also been a growing awareness of the importance of indigenous spirituality, which, because of the links between the ecosystem and the way of life of native peoples, converges with beliefs about the protection of the natural environment (Boff 1995, 2008; Irarrázaval 2000). Another convergence is between environmental concerns and gender analysis (Gebara 2007), which takes the form of ecofeminism. In this analysis, patriarchal Christianity is linked to the oppression of women and poor people, as well as the destruction of the natural world (Gebara 1999). Together, all these developments suggest that liberation theology has a promising future as it adapts to the awareness of a growing number of concerns about human beings and the planet that supports all life.

9. Conclusions

Despite numerous assassination attempts, liberation theology is alive and well and living in people who are engaged in struggles to transform unequal social systems. Its persistence suggests implications for future research. This could include studies of indigenous, black, feminist, and Earth-centered theologies; studies to examine the relationship of the theology to leftist governments, such as in Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Venezuela; and finally, research to learn about pastoral programs in countries that have not been studied as much as others, such as Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Although these countries are not known for the presence of progressive bishops, they could provide case studies of the development of liberationist pastoral programs in the absence of episcopal support, as shown in Levine's (1981, 1992) studies in Colombia.

The continuing evolution of liberation theology described above is evidence of resilience in the face of both physical violence and psychological attacks. Those who claim otherwise may appear to be either promulgators of propaganda or well-intentioned people who have been influenced by that propaganda. There are certainly places where disillusionment has set in because of the presence of anti-liberationist bishops who have not yet retired, the weakening of social movements in which Christians had participated, or, in the case of Nicaragua, the transformation into a dictatorship of a revolutionary government that had previously been characterized by mutual support with progressive church people. Nevertheless, the research of this author and others, especially in Brazil, demonstrates that liberation theology continues to influence the actions of Christian lay people, clergy, and religious sisters who work with the poor. It also shows tangible results in pastoral

programs and social movements. Although the latter are separate from any church, they are populated by many people who identify with progressive Christianity.

Finally, as noted above, liberationist Christians are encouraged by the words and actions of Pope Francis. In addition to providing spiritual support to religious activists, giving them the strength to continue moving forward in their work, his appointing of progressive bishops and cardinals who will outlive the aging pontiff make it likely that the influence of liberation theology will persist into the foreseeable future.

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Notes

- ¹ Although liberation theology has spread beyond the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America, the focus of this article is on Catholicism in that region because this has been the target of most of the attacks on the theology and its adherents.
- ² A seminal version of this analysis will appear in Cousineau (Forthcoming). This material is used with permission of the editor of the volume.
- ³ Citations of authors with differing perspectives are intended to demonstrate the political neutrality of the evidence.

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