

Liberation and Theology: A Pedagogical Challenge

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FOR MANY IN LATIN AMERICA, Liberation Theology offered an economic and a historical argument to challenge political oppression and the violence of poverty in the post-World War II period. Inspired in part by Vatican II and later the 1968 Latin American Bishops Conference in Medellín, Colombia, theologians like Ernesto Cardenal, Leonardo Boff, Hélder Câmara, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and Óscar Romero, among others, criticized a political and economic system that they argued perpetuated structural inequality and oppression. Liberation Theology attracted passionate adherents in Latin America and abroad who praised the movement's boldness. Others framed Liberation Theology primarily in the context of Cold War concerns and U.S. foreign policy interests and criticized the movement as a mere front for the expansion of Communism into the Americas.¹ With the enthronement of Pope John Paul II in 1978, the Vatican actively attempted to suppress the movement by silencing multiple Liberation Theologians.² Since the 1990s, transitions to democratic governments and improved economic conditions, albeit unevenly, has raised questions about the relevance of Liberation Theology to the region.³

My paper examines the pedagogical challenges of teaching Liberation Theology to undergraduates in a non-religion class. For many interested in Latin American, U.S., and world history, the topic of Liberation Theology remains deeply relevant and it continues to draw student interest.

Moreover, there is also public interest as evidenced by media coverage of Pope Francis and his relationship, or lack thereof, to Liberation Theology during Argentina's Dirty War. In my experience, there are two major problems and possible solutions to teaching Liberation Theology. The first is to design the course that moves beyond Camilo Torres or Pope John Paul II's very public chastisement of Father Ernesto Cardenal in order to explore more deeply and critically the place of Liberation Theology in Latin American history and experience.⁴ Rather than focusing on the sensational (which admittedly does draw students' initial interest) or treating Liberation Theology as an interesting but a fleeting footnote to twentieth-century Latin American history, I argue that Liberation Theology represents a case study for the "Latinamericanization" of the Catholic Church. Secondary challenges concern how to best address both liberation and theology in class assignments and discussions in order to provide a sound historical yet also theological foundation for the topic. Liberation Theologians have produced volumes of writings; however, some of these works are not easily accessible for non-theologians and other writings have not yet been translated into English. Over several years, I have identified and integrated into the course documents that are readily available online and that are appropriate and accessible for students to understand some of the basic core ideas of the movement. Further, because this is also a history course, the theology must be made relevant to Latin Americans' experiences of the last half-century. In this class, an emphasis is placed on examining how the laity and the clergy understood, experienced, and lived Christian Base Communities, *praxis*, and the preferential option for the poor. Achieving these two goals can best be accomplished by engaging students to explore the nuances and complexities through case studies of Brazil, Nicaragua, and El Salvador.

The Case for Latinamericanization

Interpretations of Liberation Theology in various Latin American history textbooks can be summed up as either a continuity or reactionary. Textbooks usually provide a general overview of the Church. Some interpret Liberation Theology as a progressive or a radical continuity, linking this movement to priests like Bartolomé de las Casas, Miguel Hidalgo, and José María Morelos. Still others, intentionally or not, seem to interpret Liberation Theology as a historical aberration. Although these textbooks acknowledge the economic and political crises resulting from Latin America's integration into the global capitalist system and the rise of military and other right-wing governments during the second half

of the twentieth century, Liberation Theology is presented as *reaction* to these events. Thus, authors in these textbooks frequently focus on Camilo Torres taking up arms against the Colombian government, Óscar Romero's last sermon and his assassination, and Pope John Paul II's confrontations with Nicaraguan priests serving in the Sandinista government. In these discussions, Liberation Theology is framed as a response to the violence and poverty that plagued Latin America, and as a fleeting momentary movement that has in the last two decades lost relevance to the region.⁵ Of course, these textbooks cover the histories of twenty countries over at least two centuries and it is expected that discussions on Liberation Theology must be brief. Further, I am not making the argument or debating whether or not Liberation Theology represents continuity or an aberration. Rather, what I want to draw attention to is the consistent narrowness of interpretations and discussions. In designing this course, my goal was to rethink Liberation Theology as an example of the "Latinamericanization" of the Catholic Church. In so doing, my goal is to reveal the larger significance of the Church, broadly defined, as one of the most important historical and contemporary institutions in Latin America. In this way, Liberation Theology, rather than a brief but ultimately doomed movement, is a prism to think more deeply and critically about the nuances and complexities of post-World War II Latin America and the historical and contemporary place of the Church in the region.

Political Scientist Edward L. Cleary argues that Vatican II fundamentally reshaped the Catholic Church in Latin America—a process he calls "Latinamericanization."⁶ According to Cleary, Vatican II advanced the call for the "adaptation of a universal church to national and local cultures." In particular, he points to Vatican Council methodology of facts/reflection/recommendations that prompted a shift in perspective from dogmatic and top-down to one that was "exploratory, inductive, and bottom-to-top."⁷ The 1968 Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) in Medellín reinforced these changes as the Bishops called for an interpretation of Vatican II with an eye towards Latin America. It is in this context of Vatican II and Medellín that Liberation Theology can best be studied in a classroom—as a theology born of Latin America's unique historical and cultural experiences. Cleary's argument is important for another reason. While there is no doubt about the significance of Vatican II, Cleary is also careful to note that Vatican Council discussions were often deeply Eurocentric and issues raised at Vatican II did not necessarily apply to Latin America or, for that matter, to the difficulties faced by other developing and poor regions of the world. Thus, what Vatican II initiated for many Latin American clergy and laity was the beginning of

an “uprooting of Latin Americans from their European theological soil” so that while still connected to the European Catholic Church, Liberation Theology also put into practice the idea that the Latin American Catholic Church and Latin Americans in general were differently informed.⁸

Arguing for Latinamericanization also recognizes that the Catholic Church in Latin America was and is not a static entity that suddenly shifted in a new direction as a result of Vatican II. Although the Church did decline in political and economic influence in the nineteenth century—a period that the Church called the “Crisis of the Christendom of the Indies”—beginning in the late nineteenth and continuing into early twentieth century, the Church underwent a period of renewal under New Christendom. Lay members were encouraged to engage the political realm as part of Catholic Action, as members of Christian democratic political parties, and through participation in mass congresses.

The Church in Latin America also experienced other changes as a result of an increased influx of foreign religious leaders and missionaries from the United States, Canada, and various European nations beginning in World War II and continuing through the 1960s. These priests and nuns slowed and in a few places reversed the long-standing problem of clerical shortage. While their arrival brought new ideas, these priests and nuns also became integrated into the Latin American political and economic realities. Second, even before Vatican II, an intellectual religious transformation was already underway in the region. The Jesuits are particularly noteworthy for their active role in the formation of Centers for Social Investigation and Action (CIAS), which were established in nearly every Latin American country. CIAS and other similar institutes focused on producing historical and sociological studies of each Latin American country. In effect, the reports produced by these institutes helped break down the historical isolation of local parishes from the national church, and the national from the regional. Finally, in 1952, Hélder Câmara of Brazil became an early organizer of the National Conferences of Bishops. In 1958, the Latin American Confederation of Religious (CLAR) organized priests and nuns into national and later a continental body. The most important outcome of these organizations was the creation of the Conference of Latin American Bishops in 1955. Thus, while the roots of the three pillars of Liberation Theology (Christian Base Communities, *praxis*, and the preferential option for the poor) can be traced to an earlier period, it is also evident that the transformative decade of the 1960s brought to the forefront decades-long institutional and regional changes.⁹ Thus, the Latinamericanization of the Catholic Church allows students to contextualize Liberation Theology as part of, rather than apart from, Latin American society, politics, and

history, as well as serves as the central reference point for readings, discussions, and study.

The Course

History 378: Liberation Theology is an upper-division elective course that is cross-listed with Religion. The class is taught during the college's four-week January term. As a Latin American historian, I teach some aspect of Church history in virtually all of my classes; however, I have no formal training in theology. The question was how to best balance theology and history. In other words, the class had to be more than a *history* of Liberation Theology. I wanted students to read, hear, and intellectually struggle with the voices of theologians, the laity, and critics. I taught the course in 2006, 2010, and 2012. The class meets four times a week for four weeks for a total of thirty-six contact hours. Students read approximately twenty theological statements, reports, and academic articles, as well as two short books. We also watch two films and two documentaries. There is limited lecture as this is primarily a reading, discussion, and writing class. Students in the course are a mix of history, religion, and political economy majors. At the conclusion of the course, students are expected to adequately demonstrate working knowledge of: 1) the historical and contemporary relations between Church, state, and society; 2) the theory and practice of Christian Base Communities, *praxis*, and the preferential option for the poor; 3) some of the key figures of the Liberation Theology movement; 4) expressions of Liberation Theology in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Brazil; and finally, 5) some of the major critics and criticisms of Liberation Theology.

This class is divided into four parts. The first few days are spent on a historical introduction to the Church in Latin America with emphases on the Church's relationship to state and society over time and the Church during the Cold War. The readings for this introductory segment include "Decree on the Apostolate of the Lay People," "1968 Medellín Documents," and the "Opening Statement by Pope John Paul II" at Puebla, Mexico in 1979. All three documents are available online. Lectures, readings, and discussions center around two questions: 1) What was the historical relationship between the Church and state and society? and 2) How do authors of the texts define the roles and duties of the laity, the religious, and the Church to society and to God?

The second part of the class is an introduction to theology. Students read Leonardo and Clodovis Boff's *Introducing Liberation Theology*, a concise and well-written overview. This book is supplemented with selected short essays from *Gustavo Gutiérrez Essential Writings*.¹⁰

However, before students read these selections, the class first discusses the following question: “What is poverty?” Many students understand poverty in terms of being materially poor—not having a good job; not having a house; driving an older model car or worse, taking public transportation; being on food stamps; or not being able to pay bills. In other words, poverty is often seen as a material or a temporary state that can be alleviated by the act of getting a better job since a better job means better pay and a better pay means being able to afford a house, a car, food, and even one’s bills.

Following this discussion, the class moves to the writings of several theologians. According to the Boffs, Gutiérrez, and other writers, poverty is not a temporary state, but systematic and structural. It is not merely material poverty, but a state of violence, oppression, and near or actual death.¹¹ The readings are intentionally chosen to challenge students’ assumptions. Having this discussion before students read the Boffs and Gutiérrez has proven to be an effective exercise in complicating the question. Needless to say, the discussions that follow in response to the readings are at times uncomfortable, but the question of what poverty is generally leads to other questions such as: What causes poverty? Who are the poor? How—or can—poverty be eliminated? What is aid? What does poverty tell us about how power is exercised locally, regionally, and globally? The goal is not to reach a consensus, but to encourage students to grapple with uncomfortable questions and sometimes even more uncomfortable answers.

The bulk of the class is spent on case studies to explore more deeply Christian Base Communities, *praxis*, and the preferential option for the poor in Brazil, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. For this third part of the class, students read, analyze, and discuss various Vatican documents, writings by Liberation Theologians, and academic history articles. Students are expected to have solid grounding in the basic theology in order to understand how people interpreted and lived these ideas—to gain insights into the interaction between ideas and the lived experience. These case studies not only provide opportunities to further explore questions about what Liberation Theologians say about the kingdom of God, place of Jesus, significance of the Gospels, history, nature of oppression, intersection of religion and society, Marxism, and so on, but county-specific case studies also allow students to more deeply explore the intersection of theology and liberation. Theology is the foundation, but liberation is what I believe makes this topic relevant, engaging, and interesting to students. It is also important to recognize that ideas are not static. As Jan Hoffman French in “A Tale of Two Priests and Two Struggles” argues, “liberation theology should be seen as a ‘flexible’

project implemented by successive generations of priests, nuns, and bishops.”¹² In this way, carefully chosen readings can offer students an opportunity to explore theology while wrestling with the complicated and nuanced ways in which people defined and expressed liberation. In sum, these case studies are not only intended to provide opportunities to further explore the theology, but most importantly, the intersection of theology and liberation.

Brazil is the first case study, and in this section, students focus on Christian Base Communities. Discussion begins with the 1964 military coup and Archbishop Hélder Câmara. Following the coup d'état, the military initiated an economic development program and political suppression that lasted two decades. Students read several texts, including Câmara's *Spiral of Violence*, published in 1971. In this book, Câmara calls attention to the escalating violence and “subhuman conditions” not only in Brazil, but globally as a result of the injustices of international trade and the Cold War conflict between the “empires” of the United States and the Soviet Union.¹³ This background is intended to help students contextualize recent Brazilian history and to consider Liberation Theology's continued relevance in the global community by critically exploring the varieties of Christian Base Communities (CBCs) and the persistence of Liberation Theology in Brazil.

According to historian Phillip Berryman, “base communities are the primary embodiment of liberation theology.”¹⁴ CBCs can be interpreted as a response to the historic shortage of priests, the failure of traditional pastoral models, and an attempt to bring Vatican II's calls for Church renewal to the mass population. CBCs were not created under the direction of the Vatican, but initiated by priests, nuns, and the laity often in poorer communities as a means to address problems such as government attacks against unions, poor working conditions, and land struggles through gospel-centered discussions, analysis, and action.¹⁵ With grounding in theology, this case study explores the effectiveness and limitations of CBCs in organizing the poor for political, economic, and environmental reforms in Sergipe and in the Amazonia. Since the end of military rule in 1985, CBCs have evolved to include struggles for racial and environmental justice. In Sergipe in Northeastern Brazil, the efforts of two priests to organize and to gain official recognition and land for the Xocó Indians and the Mocambo offer an example of Liberation Theology's flexibility and continued relevancy.¹⁶ The documentary, *They Killed Sister Dorothy*, offers another excellent example of religious leaders' continued active engagement with local issues, in this case, the ongoing convoluted and sometimes violent struggle for land and resources in the Amazonia. Sister Dorothy Stang's murder and trial reveal a struggle

that is both historic and contemporary.¹⁷ These examples ask students to rethink the role and place of CBCs in Brazilian history and to critically evaluate those who argue that Liberation Theology has lost its relevance in contemporary Brazil and beyond.

While Brazil's CBCs reveal cooperative, laity-centered Christian activism, Nicaragua offers an opportunity to engage students in the question of the limitations and extent of *praxis*. Similar to the activism of religious leaders in organizing Brazil's local populations, in Nicaragua, the successful overthrow of the Somoza Dynasty instituted the Sandinista government. While much has been written about the revolution, the Sandinistas, and the Contra War, what Nicaragua also provides is an example of revolutionary *praxis*. Gutiérrez argues that theology is secondary to the first act, which is a commitment to the poor. This commitment is not only the act of listening, identifying, or living with the poor, but also to act with (and not for) the poor against injustice.¹⁸ In Nicaragua, many priests and nuns actively opposed the decades-long Somoza dynasty. However, here the commitment to the poor took on a revolutionary tone as represented by Fathers Miguel D'Escoto, Fernando Cardenal, Ernesto Cardenal, and Edgard Parrales, who served in the Sandinista government as Foreign, Educational, and Cultural ministers and as Ambassador, respectively. These clergy not only became known as "Red priests," but were publicly chastised and eventually censured by the Vatican for their political activities.¹⁹ Questions raised in this case study include: What is the extent and limitations of *praxis*? How did religious leaders reconcile Christianity with politics, or in this case, revolution? Attempts to address these questions resulted in some of the most lively and, at times, very heated discussions about the role of religion and religious leaders in politics. Is there separation between religion and politics or is such a separation even possible? When is it acceptable for religious leaders to participate in politics and in what capacity? Certainly, the aim of these questions was not to find *the* answer, but to challenge students to examine their own assumptions about separation of church and state in the context of *praxis* in Revolutionary Nicaragua.

Finally, El Salvador offers the most intense and, as many students have commented, the most depressing case study of this course. For El Salvador, the class focuses primarily on one text: Archbishop Óscar Romero's *Voice of the Voiceless*. Romero's transformation from a "bookish" monk into one of the most outspoken critics of the Salvadoran government is well documented.²⁰ For this segment, the focus is on using this collection of sermons, pastoral letters, and homilies to discuss the preferential option for the poor. As Gutiérrez argues, preference does not imply God only loves the poor or that the poor are inherently good,

but rather that “God is good and prefers the forgotten, the oppressed, the poor, the abandoned.”²¹ Analysis of the preferential option for the poor is multi-layered, as Romero’s writings embody what the Boffs describe as the “three levels of Liberation Theology:” professional, pastoral, and popular.²² Although Romero was a professional theologian, as the Boffs argue, the three levels constantly interact, support, and reinforce each other in the practice of Liberation Theology. Romero’s writings and activities give clues to how these three levels constantly interacted, supported, and reinforced each other during El Salvador’s long and horrific civil war. I emphasize a close reading with attention to the question of “sin,” violence, and the role and responsibility of the Church in and to society. For students, the question of legitimate and illegitimate violence and of sin proved to be particularly important in helping them understand the recent history of El Salvador, as well as to develop a more nuanced understanding of how Liberation Theologians interpreted, understood, and *acted* in regards to the preferential option for the poor.

The course concludes with several documents written by detractors and critics. Of these, writings by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) have proven to be particularly effective. Cardinal Ratzinger argued that the “phenomenon of liberation theology reveals that it constitutes a fundamental threat to the faith of the Church.”²³ As the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Ratzinger saw Liberation Theology as a deviation from Church teachings and became the enforcer of a more conservative Church under Pope John Paul II. One of the major criticisms made by Ratzinger and other critics concerned what they argued was the Marxist orientation of Liberation Theology. Ratzinger argued that Liberation Theology’s use of class struggle to interpret the problems of the world was not only misguided, but also dangerous since Marxism and Christianity were not and could never be compatible. He argued that the biblical poor had been erroneously re-characterized as “proletariat in the Marxist sense and thus [Liberation Theologians] justify Marxism as the legitimate hermeneutics for understanding the Bible.”²⁴ For this final part of the class, the goal is not to determine whether or not Liberation Theology was or is Marxist, but to dissect the arguments made by critics like Ratzinger and the counterarguments made by supporters of Liberation Theology in the context of Latin America during the Cold War. I ask students to consider why Marxist language made sense for some Latin American Liberation Theologians and supporters. Why were some of the most vocal and important critics non-Latin Americans?²⁵ Finally, what does this possibly reveal about international political and economic power systems and the relationship of the Latin American Church to the

Vatican? In sum, in this final segment, students are asked to pull together the various threads and to revisit Latinamericanization of the Church.

Conclusion

Liberation Theology remains a fascination for many students of Latin American, U.S., and world history. This course has been challenging, but deeply rewarding to teach. At initial glance, the course seems rather narrow in topic and scope. However, this course is far from that. Rather than only presenting a history of Liberation Theology, this course is both a theological and a historical study of the Church in Latin America in the twentieth century. Through the framework of Latinamericanization, Liberation Theology can be interpreted as a movement that is solidly grounded in the Latin American history and experience. In this way, Liberation Theology can serve as a prism to explore deeply one of the most interesting and volatile periods in recent history, while enabling students to engage questions and issues beyond only theology or liberation.

Notes

1. See Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth, eds., *The Politics of Latin American Liberation Theology: The Challenge to U.S. Public Policy* (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute Press, 1988).

2. One of the most infamous cases was the year-long silencing of Brazilian Franciscan Leonardo Boff in 1985. Robert McAfee Brown, "Leonardo Boff: Theologian for All Christians," *Christian Century*, 2-9 July 1986.

3. Edward A. Lynch, "The Retreat of Liberation Theology," *Catholic Culture*, reprinted from *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* (February 1994): 12-21, <<http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=643&CFID=143834731&CFTOKEN=12385307>>.

4. Camilo Torres Restrepo was a Colombian priest who in 1965 joined Ejército de Liberación Nacional. He was killed in 1966 during a skirmish with Colombian military forces. In 1983, during his visit to Nicaragua, Pope John Paul II on the runway of the airport very publicly admonished the Sandinista Government's Minister of Culture Father Ernesto Cardenal Martínez. Torres and Cardenal have been widely cited by critics as examples of the problems of Liberation Theology; a movement that opened the way for priests to take up arms or to openly serve in a government sympathetic to Cuba and to communism.

5. See Edwin Williamson, *The Penguin History of Latin America*, revised ed. (London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books, 2009), 362-364; Benjamin Keen and Keith Haynes, *A History of Latin America*, seventh ed. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company,

2004), 580-583; and John Charles Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 270-274. Other textbooks do not discuss Liberation Theology. See Alexander Dawson, *Latin America Since Independence: A History with Primary Sources* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

6. Edward L. Cleary and Timothy J. Steigenga, *Resurgent Voices in Latin America: Indigenous Peoples, Political Mobilization, and Religious Change* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 9.

7. Edward L. Cleary, "A New Church: From Medellín to Puebla," in *Crisis and Change: The Church in Latin America Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), <http://www.domcentral.org/library/cleary_books/crisis/index.html>.

8. Edward L. Cleary and Timothy J. Steigenga, *Resurgent Voices in Latin America: Indigenous Peoples, Political Mobilization, and Religious Change* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 9.

9. For more in-depth discussion of the Latin American Church in the first half of the twentieth century, see Edward L. Cleary, "A New Leadership: From Inertia to Momentum," in *Crisis and Change: The Church in Latin America Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), <http://www.domcentral.org/library/cleary_books/crisis/index.html>; Enrique Dussel, ed., *The Church in Latin America, 1492-1992* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 105-153; and John Frederick Schwaller, *A History of the Catholic Church in Latin America: From Conquest to Revolution and Beyond* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 189-230.

10. I use two essays from this excellent collection: "Toward and Theology of Liberation" and "Preferential Option for the Poor" in *Gustavo Gutiérrez Essential Writings*, ed. James B. Nickoloff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 23-28 and 143-146.

11. Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 24-33.

12. Jan Hoffman French, "A Tale of Two Priests and Two Struggles: Liberation Theology from Dictatorship to Democracy in the Brazilian Northeast," *The Americas* 63, no. 3 (January 2007): 413.

13. Hélder Câmara, *Spiral of Violence* (London, United Kingdom: Sheed and Ward, 1971), <<http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/general/spiral-of-violence.htm>>.

14. Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology: Essential Facts about the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America and Beyond* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 63.

15. One of the most famous Christian Base Communities is Solentiname in Nicaragua. See Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 1982.

16. French, 413.

17. *They Killed Sister Dorothy*, dirs. Daniel Junge and Henry Ansbacher, documentary, 94 minutes, First Run Features, 2009, DVD.

18. *Gustavo Gutiérrez Essential Writings*, ed. James B. Nickoloff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 30-34.

19. For political and historical background, I show the documentary *Nicaragua: No Pasaran*, dir. David Bradbury, 73 minutes, Frontline Films, 2008, DVD.

20. There are a number of recent biographies on Archbishop Óscar Romero. See James Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005) and Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of the Saints* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

21. *Gustavo Gutiérrez*, 143-146.

22. While Romero was certainly a "professional theologian," I argue that his activities in El Salvador and his assassination in 1980 also make him a part of the pastoral and the popular. Boff and Boff, 12-14.

23. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Liberation Theology," 1984, <<http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/ratzinger/liberationtheol.htm>>.

24. Ibid.

25. See Michael Novak, "The Case Against Liberation Theology," *The New York Times*, 21 October 1984, <<http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/religion/liberation-theology.pdf>>.