Pax Americana - Christianity and Empire: The Effect of Perceptions of American Foreign Policy on Liberation Theology in Latin America

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U.S. officials were trapped by history and circumstance. They lacked both the imagination and perspective to understand how they less resembled the defenders of a free world than those who defended the late Roman Empire. —LaFeber 260

Introduction*

The development of the theology of liberation in Latin America is an intriguing and revealing phenomenon—intriguing because it developed at this particular time in history, and revealing because of its assumptions concerning United States policy. The first aspect is easily explained if viewed in the terms dictated by the second, that is, the development of Liberation Theology over the last twenty-five years as a direct result of American policies in Latin America. While it is obvious that United States foreign policy does not dictate the style and specific beliefs of any movement, an argument can be made that U.S. actions, and Latin American theologians' perceptions of those actions, have exerted an undeniable influence on the formation and evolution of the theology of liberation indigenous to Latin America. It is important to remember that such an argument must be based not on the actual policy goals of the United States, but on the impression such actions convey to those towards whom they are directed. Liberation Theology is influenced by the judgement of perceived actions, and not necessarily on the actual facts or intentions of U.S. foreign policy. While this may seem to be a fanciful or irrelevant proposition, it is quite appropriate to our topic. Liberation Theology developed (and continues to develop) in a region that has always been acted upon, instead of with or towards, by the United States. It is for this reason that the Latin American impressions of U.S. foreign policy will be emphasized over (and despite) the intentions of such policy. It is logical to think that the impressions a policy

*Since this paper was written in the fall of 1989, it does not reflect the political changes that have occurred in recent months (except tangentially in the revised conclusion). It is important to note one thing: very little has changed in the U.S. client states of Latin America. The successful elections in Nicaragua have no immediate bearing on policies of the U.S. in the rest of Latin America. The recent changes do, however, bode well for the future of the Southern Hemisphere, if the U.S. decides to redirect its resources, formerly allocated in Europe, towards solving the problems of Latin American dependency. Let this paper serve as a call for such action.
creates in other nations are more important than the actuality of intent. The point of this paper is to show that U.S. actions in the world community, perceived or real, have had a profound effect on the formation of the ideas of Liberation Theology. This will be done partially by accepting that many of Liberation Theology’s assumptions about U.S. policies are correct. It is first necessary to define the framework of thought used by Liberation Theology. It will then be a simple matter to discuss the role of the United States within this body of thought.

Structural Oppression

Structural oppression is the framework within which all Liberation Theology operates. It is the source and dominant element of this style of theological interpretation. Without the beginnings and development of structural oppression, there would not be a need for Liberation Theology. Structural oppression is inherently related to imperialism and a maintenance of the status quo, hence the term “structural”. “For most Latin Americans, to speak of oppression is to speak of imperialism. This has been a starting point for Liberation Theology in dependent societies like Latin America” (Torres, “Opening” 266). It is a recognition of this situation of organized and systematically maintained oppression of one nation or people by another that leads to the need to develop some sort of liberating theory. The theory of structural oppression states, in so many words, that the international division of labor and the status quo of nations is preserved in the interests of those who hold power. The interests of the center countries are forcibly maintained at the expense of the rights and freedoms of the periphery. In the specific case of the United States and Latin America, these interests are cheap, docile labor and agreeable circumstances for U.S. corporate operation (LaFeber 281). These structures are perpetuated by the stronger power over and above any needs of the objects of oppression. The international division of labor exacerbates the problem by forcing the exploited countries to continue to produce non-manufactured goods, assuring that they will never be able to compete as an equal participant in a world market by adding surplus value to a product and advancing economically in the stratification of countries. “The main interest of foreign investors lies in freezing the international division of labor so that less developed countries continue to be producers of raw materials” (Evans 19). This policy of preserving an order (status quo) that is burdensome and exploitative of another population in the private interest of a single country, is the source of the oppression to which Liberation Theology reacts.

Structural oppression (as used by Liberation Theologians) further assumes that a connection exists between wealth and poverty. This is a belief rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which arises originally from the dialectic nature of the concept of impoverishment in the Hebrew language. All words in Hebrew that communicate an impression of poverty indicate, to a greater or lesser degree, that the situation is not one of unnatural inferiority (Tamez 192-3). Poverty is not
a natural condition, but a specific result of one person’s intentional action, designed unjustly to deny and impoverish another for personal benefit. In this same way, societal oppression is exacerbated by an international system that exploits entire nations of people. “The cause of this situation is specific and clear. It is the capitalist system, resulting from domination by foreign imperialism...” (Christians for Socialism 12). If there are rich nations in the world, they must, by definition, be rich as a result of the subjugation of other nations. When this subjugation becomes institutionalized and inflexible, structural oppression arises.

This style of thinking contains an inherent criticism of the capitalist system, specifically the system of the United States. It is evident that structural oppression requires an unyielding division of labor, and inflexible status quo, and an expropriation of the poor by the rich. All these are seen by Latin American Liberation Theology as aspects of the foreign policy of the U.S., which is the most active representative of capitalism in Latin America. If capitalism requires that all these actions be performed in order to achieve successful results, it becomes clear that the U.S. is serving as an oppressor in the interests of its capitalist system. “In a poor world the U.S. is overdeveloped, consumes much more than its share of the world’s resources, uses its military might to maintain its privileges, and is still acutely aware that it has not attained the “good life”. Is there no room for a theological critique of capitalism?” (Berryman 53). In this sense, Liberation Theology is reacting against the institutionalized oppression inherent in capitalism which the U.S. exports to Latin America.

A short investigation of a few U.S. exploits in Latin America exposes examples of the actual mechanism of structural oppression. In addition to the increase in violence and inequality that is indicative of structural oppression, the U.S. has consistently foiled attempts of countries in this sphere to sever connections with the system and create a less exploitative, or simply different, economy. “Central and South Americans repeatedly tried to break free of this system so they could... “creatively...check clerical and military power” and “state tyranny.” But each time they tried...they ran up against the power of the United States government” (LaFeber 282). The United States preserves its interests, and in Latin America, its interests and the structure of oppression are intrinsically connected.

**Dependency Theory and Self Determination**

The theory of dependency centers the emphasis of Liberation Theology. Dependency theory discusses the actual dimensions of oppression and the method by which it develops. It is concerned first and foremost with the relationship of the dominant figure to the dependent figure, in a dialectic manner. “The relationship between domination and dependency focuses the issue for theology” (Torres, “Opening” 267). The problems of the dependent person, group, or nation are caused by the actions of the dominant person, group or nation. While this is similar to
structural oppression, dependency considers also the political structures and the specific relationships between the parties.

The first issue addressed by dependency theory is the limitation of the ability to make an autonomous choice. Authentic development of the self is a central issue for theologians—salvation must be chosen freely, and the opportunity for choice must exist if God is to work in the world. Dependency of any sort limits a person’s capacity to “be”. If people are unable to make choices and decisions for themselves, they are dependent upon an outside agent for choice-making. They are, in the Hegelian sense, limited in their ability to become, and thus can never attain “being,” which is essential to true religious humanity (see, for example, Tillich’s “Courage to Be”). In the same sense, “Latin Americans today are oppressed primarily in their being precisely because they are oppressed in their capacity to be (i.e., their power to make decisions concerning their own history and their mission therein)” (Scannone 224). They are prevented from pursuing their own authentic humanity by the outside forces manipulating their current and past history. The history of Latin America is one of a succession of dependencies, each repressive in a different but equally limiting manner. It is a “history of the successive modifications of their conditions of dependence” (Gutierrez, Theology 84). The only outlet for a true and authentically human development in Latin America lies in the attainment of freedom from external dependency.

Unfortunately, such self-sufficient independence does not occur without the cooperation of the dominant figure, a cooperation that is rarely forthcoming. The U.S. certainly does not seem to be working toward a peaceful and constructive end to its domination of Latin America. From 1972-1979, Nixon’s national security-dependent model of capitalism was spreading through the Americas, leading to a series of coups and a general strengthening of military dictatorships (Dussel, History 222). The U.S. and others continue to use “their economic strength to make Latin American development dependent on—and subordinate to—the interests of those leading powers” (LaFeber 17).

The underdeveloped and constrained state of existence in Latin America exhibits yet another component of dependency theory: in a dependent situation, the external dominating force shapes and controls the internal structures. Due to the nature of a dominant-dependent relationship, the ruling class of a dependent country will either resemble, or work for the interests of the dominant actor. “Dependence is not simply an ‘external factor’ affecting international relations; it is a situation that has molded the internal structures of our country” (Assmann 124). The theory used to defend this state of affairs, interdependence or “Trilateral Developmentalism,” is simply not a viable alternative theory (Dussel, History 229). To claim that economies are intrinsically dependent upon each other, when one can manipulate the other in any way it chooses, is a spurious and ridiculous justification for domination. It also obscures the issue. The crux of the matter is this: the dominance of the United States results directly in the formation of oppressive and exploitative
The U.S. is, in fact, responsible for much of the repression that Liberation Theology desires to overcome, to the benefit of all Latin Americans.

Institutionalized Violence and Christian Peace

One of the most important developments in Latin American Liberation Theology was the “Medellin Document on Peace,” which is usually considered to be the foundation point of modern Liberation Theology. The most important part of this document was the creation of the term “institutionalized violence.” This was perhaps the first integrative term used to refer to the entirety of oppression and dependency experienced by periphery countries. It was the catalyst for all future discussion of theology, and defined the new field of Liberation Theology. It was a new way of speaking about injustice and it laid the blame for oppression squarely at the feet of a structural deficiency (read: international capitalism) in a way no religious philosophy had done before. Institutionalized violence occurs when, in the words of Medellin, “because of a structural deficiency of industry or agriculture, of national and international economy, of cultural and political life, “whole towns lack necessities, live in such dependence as hinders all initiative and responsibility as well as every possibility for cultural promotion and participation in social and political life,” thus violating fundamental rights” (Popularum Progressio, as quoted in CELAM 8). This is a political and temporal statement of position.

Institutionalized violence becomes even more of a challenge to Liberation Theology when it is compared to the Christian and Biblical concepts of peace. Peace is the exact opposite of institutionalized violence. The Medellin document defines it as “a work of justice. It presupposes and requires the establishment of a just order in which men can fulfill themselves as men, where dignity is respected,...access to truth recognized,...freedom guaranteed; an order where man is not an object but an agent in his own history” (CELAM 6). The unity of these two terms must be understood within the context of structural oppression and dependence from which they arise. Peace equals justice, freedom, participation; violence is institutionalized and entrenched in opposition to these things. The question that arises out of such statements is this: what is the role of the church in social struggle? Is the church concerned only with the interior man? Or does that concern include creating the conditions necessary to the development of the interior man? It is obvious from the language of Medellin, that Liberation Theology affirms temporal support for social change.

Medellin did not, however, defend its decision from a strictly Biblical position, a weakness that was exploited by the theologians of the status quo. In reaction to it, later liberation theologians have developed a Biblically legitimate and compelling reason to accept the Medellin proposition. The reasoning is simple; the message of Christianity is that obstacles to the kingdom of heaven
can and must be removed. “The sociopolitical order is the dimension of the very proclamation of the Christian faith, which is contemplation, commitment, and a personal and social criticism of all that would separate us from the kingdom” (Galilea 180). The law of Jesus is an interior law, and it requires the ability to develop the interior man. A social system that prevents this development is an obstacle to the attainment of the kingdom; thus, political systems that contain institutionalized violence must be changed.

The other criticism of this aspect of Liberation Theology (which is the very core of its involvement in politics) is that such policies distort and manipulate dogma and belief to serve temporal ideals. Liberation Theology has a response to this also—the message of Christianity is one of liberation towards heaven. All human creations are subordinate to this message. “A human societal life liberated as much as possible from all alienation constitutes the absolute value, whereas all religious institutions, dogmas, sacraments, and ecclesiastical authorities have only a relative (i.e., functional) value” (Segundo 243). This concept extends to political and economic systems as well. All human things are functional towards the eschatological goal of the realization of the kingdom of heaven. In the eyes of Liberation Theology, all currently dependent Latin American regimes are not only relatively, but positively damaging, and lack even a functional value. It becomes more and more evident that a true theology must be open to the progressivism of the left. Only the politics of the left are concerned first with the realization of human potential, and not first with the efficiency of the social order. “Thus sensitivity to the left is an intrinsic element of any authentic theology” (Segundo 257). The catalyst for this idea is the institutionalized violence created by the outside dominance of the U.S. It all comes back to the beginning.

**U.S. Imperialism and the Latin American Power Elites**

As much as United States citizens would like to believe that poverty and wealth have no connection, the fact that they are and must be linked is a dominant reality in the modern world. Marx demonstrates...that the wealth of some depends on the poverty of others” (Iguiniz 284). This connection is fervently believed by liberation theologians and dominates their interpretation of U.S. actions in the Third World. The argument assumes that capitalism requires and perpetuates exploitative poverty. Perhaps the definitive statement about the nature of capitalism comes from Gustavo Gutierrez, the first liberation theologian to discuss Liberation Theology as an organic whole, who said, “the dynamics of the capitalist economy lead to the establishment of a center and a periphery, simultaneously generating progress and growing wealth for the few and social imbalances, political tensions, and poverty for the many” (Gutierrez, Theology 84). If his point is accepted, then it becomes fairly simple to examine the aspects of American foreign policy in Latin America which have contributed to, and exacerbated, the already exploitative and oppressive situation.
The United States, as a stronger and more developed state, is able to use its influence and power to maintain its position in the world. This often requires the use of political and economic weapons to maintain the standard of living of its own citizens. “In the international community, we see how food and starvation are being used to preserve at least some elements of the old hegemony” (Research 10). It has been stated elsewhere that the U.S. consumes a much greater share of world resources than other nations. In order to continue to appropriate such a share, other nations must be and are impoverished. This overconsumption of goods and the consequent over-appropriation of resources requires an international system of exploitation. When this is coupled with the uncontrolled and relatively unregulated growth of multinational corporations, the United States becomes a focus for the problems of international oppression. “America’s greatest failure has been its ineffectual struggle with the moral dilemmas of industrialism and the riotous growth and independence of American corporate power” (Coleman 123). This corporate exploitation of foreign citizens, and the U.S. government’s defense of corporate interests, has made the U.S. the center for exploiting alienation (Evans 35). It is in the interest of the United States to maintain its overconsumption in order to prevent oppression and unrest in its own society. Accordingly, the U.S. government has consistently defended U.S. corporate interests in Latin America, usually at the expense of Latin Americans. This requires the exercise of some sort of colonial influence, recognized or not, in an autonomous and independent country (Evans 21). Usually such influence is best peddled within a dictatorship or oligarchy because such rulership has similar interests to the U.S., namely an expropriation of an excess profit at the expense of others. In effect, these governments have become clients of the U.S., serving U.S. interests and cooperating in the suppression of the population. Evidence of such policy is manifest. “Central American troops protecting oligarchs closely resembled U.S. troops protecting U.S. interests” (LaFeber 152). The actions of the Latin elites were, in most circumstances, more beneficial to the corporations within their borders than to the people they were allegedly representing. Brazil is a perfect example of this occurring. The military is U.S. trained, the government bends over backwards to accommodate U.S. corporations, and it brutally suppresses its citizens, assuring a docile, cheap labor force. “The men who are today directing Brazil have never been the true leaders, and it is because of the desire of certain foreign powers that these men are in power today” (Dussel, History 143). If these U.S. interests are not preserved, the economic weapons of starvation and economic sabotage can be brought to bear, although the United States can certainly count on the cooperation of the comprador classes (Research 8). Multinationals can cause problems as well by stirring up opposition and internal strife if their interests are not preserved (Evans 44). Even in the worst of all regimes, in the midst of the worst possible actions, U.S. influence can be found. The most graphic example among many is the presence of U.S. troops in Guatemala in 1971 during the height of a particularly brutal repression; twenty-five U.S.
officers were present and working with the Guatemalan army, when over 10,000 political dissidents were imprisoned or “eliminated” (LaFeber 257). The general policy appears to be one of support for any regime as long as it supplies the United States with materials it needs, irrespective of any actions the indigenous elites have to take to maintain order. “Washington’s only consistent objective throughout the decade [1970’s] was to arm and support military forces which...frequently oppressed and slaughtered their own people” (LaFeber 269).

When U.S. foreign policy in Latin America is examined closely, particularly over the last thirty years, an interesting parallel emerges. The basic structure of relationships looks something like this: there is a poor and exploited population that supplies cheap labor and materials to maintain the American standard of living; these masses are ruled by small groups who receive weapons and military assistance from the U.S. to assure that its interests are protected; and, finally, the wealthy U.S. structures and dominates the economies of each of these smaller states, limiting each to a particular aspect of a larger economic/military sphere of influence (Tamez 189-90). This observation reveals an almost perfect analogy in the situation of Palestinian Judaism in the time of Jesus. The masses in Latin America are in the same situation as the Palestinian Jews, i.e., they are oppressed, overtaxed, and dominated by both a foreign empire and their subservient local rulers. The oligarchs correspond almost exactly to the “Herodians, who allied with the Roman authority and took advantage of the system” (Galilea 177-8). The United States, obviously, plays the role of the Roman Empire—an inexhaustible consumer of goods and conqueror of lesser nations, through economic instead of military power. This is the standard method by which the exploitation discussed in the first three sections takes place, and it is against this very model of systematic exploitation that Jesus spoke out. It now becomes clear why Liberation Theology appeared in its current form in this time in history: the situation is the same as the original system of oppression from which Christianity developed. Liberation Theology is exactly what it claims to be—a return to the roots of Christian faith.

The Model of Liberation

In order for Latin America to achieve liberation, certain conditions must be met, the first of which is the liberation of nations. Until the ruling classes are no longer under the control of the United States and orienting a majority of their energy towards the oppression of the population, individual liberation is not possible. Liberation requires a government that provides adequate goods to the citizens and allows a distinct and full participation in government. “The national liberation of the dominated countries is therefore necessary for the social liberation of the oppressed classes” (Dussel, History 19). Such changes are not in the interest of U.S. foreign policy—its position in the world rests on its ability to dominate and appropriate the economies of the periphery.
The theology of liberation requires that certain structural changes occur in the current political system in order to realize independent, authentic development. There are two ways to accomplish these changes. The first and most likely is revolution. This is not an idle speculation: according to Dussel's interpretation of *Popularum Progressio*, "the Church does not condemn revolution in principle, [and] revolution is acceptable when it serves the cause of justice..." (Dussel, *History* 141). It is not an option that is in the best interests of the United States, however. We have poured billions of dollars and uncountable weapons into Latin America, only to have our policies backfire. Continuing failing policies will succeed only in guaranteeing violent revolution where it is avoidable.

The second option is the one preferred by Liberation Theology. It requires the destruction of oppression as such, which would require the cooperation of the source of domination. This solution is amenable to all and deals with a volatile situation by humanizing the participants. "The oppressor is not annihilated by the oppressed, but rather is humanized by the destruction of oppression itself..." (Dussel, *History* 241). This is what Liberation Theology calls the "third way" between capitalism and communism, and it is a direction the United States would do well to consider. The Pax Americana has been no peace at all. There has been a consistent war between classes and countries for the entire period of U.S. domination in Latin America. Such policies do nobody any good. Perhaps U.S. policy makers should listen to the lessons of Liberation Theology and make a concerted effort truly to aid in the establishment of social justice in Latin America. While this would require a modicum of sacrifice in the early stages, the advantages and eventual outcome would certainly outweigh any temporary economic inconvenience. One need only look at the historical example of Rome. We are, as Segundo would say, at a "crucial" moment in history. The U.S. can either choose to continue its current behavior and, ignoring the example of history, suffer the same fate as its predecessor, or we can forge a new course more amenable to the citizens of both the periphery and the developed world. Considering the events of spring 1990 in Eastern Europe, perhaps it is time to follow the example of the Soviet Union, and allow our own economic buffer its autonomy as well. There could be no greater move towards the reconciliation of tension and injustice in the modern world, for such action in concert with that of the USSR, is a visible proof of the closing gap between capitalism and communism. The "third way" is upon us. It is up to our leaders to choose to participate.
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