

Liberation Theology for Armchair Theologians

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Contents

Preface and Acknowledgments ix

1. Resistance! 1

2. Opening the Windows 21

3. Liberation Theologies: What Are They? 41

4. Early Proponents 63

5. Liberation in *El Norte* 85

6. The Faiths of the People 113

7. Moving beyond Liberation Theology 141

Notes 153

For Further Reading 157

Index 161

Preface and Acknowledgments

I am amazed at the misinformation surrounding liberation theology. Both the theology and the religious movement associated with it have been demonized by religious institutions (including churches), the media, and governments. To have theological disagreements would not warrant much concern if it were not for the fact that multitudes throughout the world who have expounded liberative theological thoughts have been killed or have disappeared. What is it about liberation theology that has led many to their graves? Why is this theological perspective deemed so dangerous? Why have governments, including that of the United States, committed so many resources to bring about its obliteration? Not since the Roman persecutions of the early Christian church have large numbers of believers in Christ been so frequently martyred by the state for holding a particular theological perspective.

No doubt, the strong negative reaction against the many manifestations of liberation theology by the privileged and powerful indicates its revolutionary nature. But liberation theology is not revolutionary as that term is usually defined by our society. What makes liberation theology truly radical is its focus on the poor, the marginalized, the dispossessed, and the disenfranchised. While most theologies are developed by religious leaders and academicians, liberation theology attempts to reflect upon the divine as understood from the underside of history. In it, the everyday trials and

Preface and Acknowledgments

tribulations of the voiceless become the source for the voice of God.

Liberation theology is so dangerous because it disrupts a religious and political worldview that supports social structures that privilege the few at the expense of the many. Ignorance of the causes of oppression is crucial to maintaining this worldview. But as the consciousness of the oppressed begins to be raised, as they begin to see with their own eyes that their repressive conditions are contrary to the will of God, the power and privilege of the few who benefit from the status quo is threatened. For this reason, liberationist theological thought must be suppressed, by whatever means necessary.

One of the most effective ways to combat liberationist theological thought is through misinformation. For this reason, a short introduction to the theology and movement—such as the book you hold in your hands—is important. My motive in writing this book was to combat the misunderstanding surrounding liberation theology, but I have found that writing for the Armchair series has been a personally fulfilling process. I am grateful to the series editor, Don McKim, for the invitation to participate. Also, I wish to thank my administrative assistant, Debbie McLean, who proofread these pages, and my research assistants, Becky Chabot and Sarah Neeley, who proofread the final galleys. And if it wasn't for the love and support I receive from my wife, Deb, none of my books would have been possible.



CHAPTER ONE

Resistance!

Wherever oppression resides, one can also find resistance. This resistance, this cry for freedom, uttered from the depths of the inhuman condition in which vast segments of the world's population have been forced to live throughout history, becomes a cry that Christian churches must hear if they wish to remain faithful to the good news. For Christians, Jesus came so that all can have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). Any theology that instead brings or is complicit with death is by definition satanic. The promise of the abundant life is not for some messianic future; it is for the here and now. Yet as we read news

Liberation Theology for Armchair Theologians

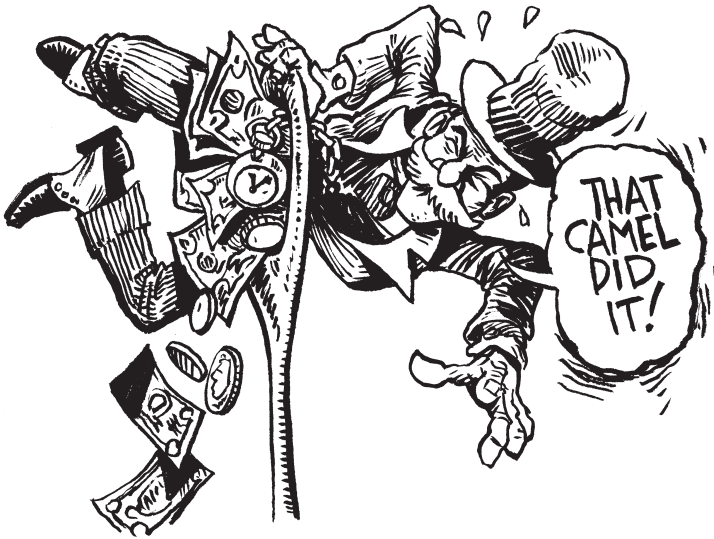
reports filled with stories of decimation, discrimination, disenfranchisement, and dispossession, we are left wondering where this abundant life is that our faith promises.

Jesus' promise of an abundant life remains beyond the grasp of most of the earth's people due in part to a disproportionate distribution of natural resources. The globalization of the economy, coupled with the military strength of a few nations (especially the United States), ensures and maintains a continual flow of cheap labor and raw materials to a privileged minority of the world's population. Not surprisingly, the rich get fewer yet wealthier, while the poor continue to grow as they slip into greater poverty. Ironically, those who benefit from these arrangements have constructed a type of Christianity that justifies global structures responsible for much of the world's economic misery.

Any armchair historian knows that our Christian story is full of atrocities committed in the name of Jesus. From the inquisition to witch burnings, from the crusades to the colonial ventures of civilizing and Christianizing the so-called heathens, the story of our faith is one of imposing oppressive structures to force others to believe and accept the same doctrines that justify the power and privilege of whatever culture is ruling. All too often, churches have stood in solidarity with the presiding political powers to carve an influential space for themselves in the nation's public arena.

From the underside of what has been considered normative, however, a cry of resistance can be heard echoing through the pages of history. We can hear this cry lifted up by some of the early church fathers who, in solidarity with the poor, portrayed wealth as an impediment to salvation. They insisted that those who possessed riches had a moral obligation toward the poor. To ignore the poor bordered on idolatry, replacing materialism for spirituality. As the

Resistance!



second-century theologian and martyr Polycarp said, “If anyone does not refrain from the love of money he will be defiled by idolatry and so be judged as if he was one of the heathen, ‘who are ignorant of the judgment of the Lord.’”¹ We can continue to follow this thread of seeking solidarity with the least of these in the actions of a medieval bishop of Paris, Guillaume d’Auxerre, who, along with other theologians living during the plagues and famine of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, insisted that the poor were not sinning if they engaged in “starvation theft.” In fact, the poor had a right to steal what they needed in order to survive. This cry against the systematic economic forces that cause oppression can also be heard in the mystical prayers of the fourteenth-century Dominican nun, Catherine of Siena. Writing against the wealthy of her time and the social structures they constructed to enrich themselves, she asked,

Liberation Theology for Armchair Theologians

“How can these wretched evil people share their possessions with the poor when they are already stealing from them?”²

It would be simplistic and unscholarly to impose the modern term *liberation theologian* upon such historical figures as Polycarp, Guillaume d’Auxerre, or Catherine of Siena. Still, we can say that these historical figures, and others like them, expressed liberationist ideals. Their understanding of Christianity led them to believe that the universal church of Jesus Christ had a moral obligation to stand in solidarity with those marginalized by the secular and ecclesiastical social structures of their day. During those times when the church appeared to be aligned more with the interests of the ruling and economically privileged classes, women and men of faith searched deep within their religious tradition to formulate a practical and spiritual response to the causes of poverty and oppression.

Obviously, this modern concept of liberation was not created *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. The historical trend of faithful servants of God resisting the powers and principalities of this world became the antecedent to what would come to be known in Latin America during the 1960s as liberation theology. In fact, we can say that any spiritual movements (not just Christian ones) that seek to dismantle the social structures responsible for the creation of poverty and oppression are liberative. It is important here to distinguish between liberation theology and liberative theologies. Liberation theology is rooted within the Christian faith, while liberative theologies need not be Christian. As we will see later, liberative religious movements can be Muslim, Hindu, or even humanist. Although our focus will remain on liberationist-type theologies emanating from Christian sources, a chapter will also explore other religious liberative theological movements.

Resistance!

Origins of Liberation Theology

A countertradition of resistance rooted in the plight of the oppressed has always existed within the Christian faith. For the purposes of this book, we will focus on the development of this liberationist countertradition in the Americas, even though this trend can be traced to the start of the Christian faith, if not before. This liberationist spirit arose in the Western hemisphere among those whom the Christian conquistadores considered savages and heathens. We can pinpoint the start of this liberationist movement in the so-called New World to January 13, 1493, for on that day, Native American blood first flowed—a prelude to one of the most notorious genocides human history has ever witnessed.



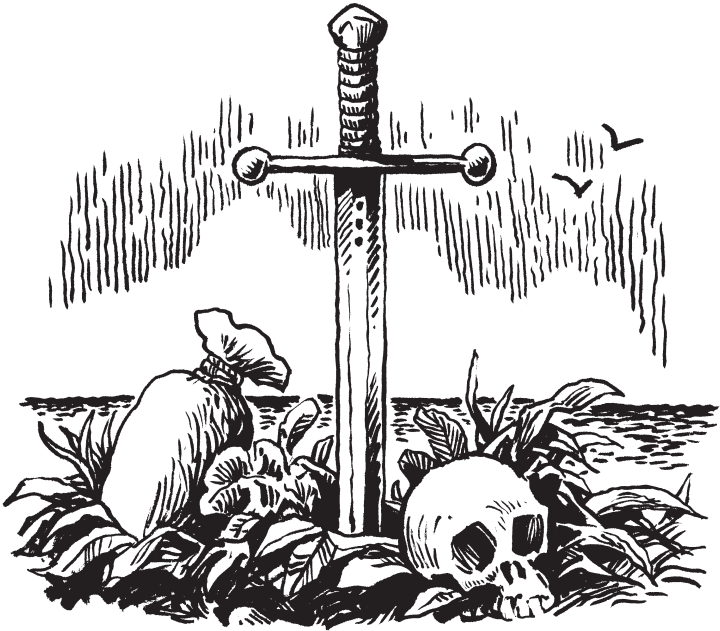
Liberation Theology for Armchair Theologians

As Christians hunted down Indian men as if they were dogs, as Indian women were being raped, and as Indian children were being disemboweled, a voice of resistance arose in the form of a *cacique*, a chieftain, by the name of Hatuey. Creating a loose confederation of Taíno Caribbean Indians to resist the invading European colonizers, Hatuey carried out a style of guerrilla warfare against the invading Christian Spaniards. This renegade chieftain was eventually captured and condemned to death as an example to others. As Hatuey was about to be burned at the stake, a Franciscan friar attempted to convert him to the Christian faith, with the promise of heaven and the threat of hell. Prior to setting the fire that would burn the Indian leader alive, the friar promised mercy in the form of strangulation. Hatuey asked that if he accepted Christianity would he go to heaven, and if he did, would he find Christians there. “Of course,” the friar replied, to which the condemned warrior retorted that he did not want to go anyplace where he would be forced to be with such cruel people as Christians. Although Hatuey was not a Christian, he is probably the first liberative figure to resist the conquest of the Americas by European Christians.

Establishing a Colonial Christendom

Hatuey and many others like him stood in solidarity with the subjugated by struggling against the forces responsible for systematic oppression, even when those forces included the Christian church. The Roman Catholic Church played a prominent role in the colonial venture, as did North American Protestant churches in later years. For the enslavement and genocide of the indigenous people to take place, the religious conquistadores required philosophical, theological, and scientific justification. By questioning if

Resistance!



Indians even had souls, clerics and conquistadores were able to divide among themselves the land, riches, labor, and precious resources used by the original inhabitants.

Shortly after a lost Columbus was discovered by the indigenous people of the Caribbean, a weakened Vatican under Pope Alexander VI (the former Rodrigo Lanzol Borja from Spain) sped up the colonial venture in 1494 by entrusting all ecclesiastical powers operating in what was then called New Spain to the Spanish crown. Through *patronato real* (the king's patronage), the king was given the right to appoint individuals to the high ecclesiastical offices and to administer the tithes. In effect, the king of Spain became a vice pope, appointing bishops whose first

Liberation Theology for Armchair Theologians

allegiance was to the crown rather than the cross. Hence, the Catholic Church, having been complicit with the powers responsible for the dispossession of the Indians, became closely aligned with the political structures and dependent upon them to exercise influence over the masses. The Church provided the crown with religious legitimacy in its actions against the indigenous inhabitants of the land; in return, the crown provided the church with a space from which to operate. Together, the cross and the sword plundered and decimated the indigenous population.

Spanish and Portuguese saw themselves as elected by God, called to what was for them a “new world” full of opportunities. They were possessed with a religious fervor to convert the so-called heathens, by the sword if necessary, and a materialist fever to take away their lands, possessions, and labor. Conquistador Hernán Cortés probably said it best: “We come to serve God and King, and also to get gold.”³ The prospects of gold and glory led conquistadores to move beyond the islands of the Caribbean and toward the mainland. Soon, mighty indigenous political structures such as the Aztec, Mayan, and Incan empires succumbed to the military superiority of the colonizers and the diseases they brought with them. The indigenous populations faced humiliating servitude and decimation.

What was established in the so-called new world was a feudal Iberian political system merged with a medieval church of those who understood their mission in the Americas as a continued crusade to eradicate nonbelievers from their presence. In the minds of the colonizers, Spain’s political goals became synonymous with Christ’s mission. For over 700 years, the Islamic Moors ruled on the Iberian Peninsula. Although there existed periods of relative peace between Muslims, Jews, and Christians, a continual crusade by Christians against Muslim and Jewish “infidels” always



existed under the surface and at times emerged in the form of violence and war. During these 700 years of Muslim rule, a militant form of Christianity was forged. In the same year that Columbus arrived in the Caribbean, the victorious Christians of Spain gave their Muslim and Jewish neighbors an ultimatum: convert or be expatriated. It was this crusading spirit that was imported to the Western Hemisphere.

On the underside of Christendom, an unofficial church of resistance was established in the Americas. Priests of various religious orders stood in solidarity with Indians. Their vows of poverty made it possible for these clerics to live and struggle with the oppressed. What developed was a two-tiered, informal ecclesiastical structure. On the top were the official representatives of Christendom, agents of and for the colonialists. At their underside were those who represented the plight of the marginalized and outcasts. Clerics such as Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484–1566), Antonio Montesinos (1486–1540), Diego de Medellín (1496–1593), Antonio

Liberation Theology for Armchair Theologians

de Valdivieso (d. 1549), and Juan del Valle (d. 1561) saw those occupying this underside as the true church. Because clerics such as these preached against the inhumanity faced by the natives and promoted resistance to oppressive policies, many modern-day liberationist theologians see them as the forerunners to what would become Latin American liberation theology. Unfortunately, many of these clerics who stood in solidarity with the “least of these” still held to the prevailing worldview that the disenfranchised were like ignorant children in need of Christian tutelage.

Bartolomé de Las Casas

Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez states: “Among those with the keenest interest in Bartolomé de Las Casas today are Latin America’s liberation theologians, who have recognized in the Dominican friar a prophetic forerunner of the church’s radical ‘option for the poor.’”⁴ Las Casas arrived in Santo Domingo in 1514 and was given an *encomienda*. The *encomienda* was a labor system employed by the conquistadores in which the Spanish crown granted to an individual both land and native people. The grantee of the *encomienda* was responsible for protecting the Indians from warring tribes and teaching them the ways of Christianity and Spanish “civilization,” including the language. In return, the natives were to provide tribute to the grantee of the *encomienda* in the form of labor, crops, or precious metals.

Las Casas eventually renounced his riches and slaves, joined the Dominican order, and dedicated his life to seeking justice for Indians. For his remaining fifty years, Las Casas devoted himself to their struggle, standing in solidarity with them as they fought the Spanish authorities for liberation from conquest. Called to be a witness of Christ to



the “godless” Indians, Las Casas soon realized that it was he, the priest and missionary, who was living without God. Las Casas concluded that conversion could not be defined as accepting some theological proposition; rather, conversion had to be based on actions taken. To be converted to Christ meant being converted through the Christlike liberative actions in which one engaged. The actions of Las Casas, including his ownership of several indigenous people as slaves, gave witness that it was he who was rejecting the message of the gospel. In short, it was he who was in need of conversion.

Because Las Casas equated salvation with the establishment of social justice, the unjust treatment of the Indians by the hands of Spaniards placed the conquistadores’ salvation



in jeopardy. Salvation could not be reduced to a profession of faith, for after all, Las Casas had lived his life professing Christianity. Salvation had to be linked to how Jesus Christ was understood. For Las Casas, and the liberationist theologians who would follow, Jesus Christ was the “least of these,” the one suffering hunger, thirst, nakedness, alienation, infirmity, and incarceration (Matt. 7:21–27). Conversion became the process by which one came to know Christ as one of the disenfranchised, and the action one took in developing a lifestyle of solidarity with the marginalized. For Las Casas, Christ could be found among the Indians because of their oppression, not because of any profession of faith that they might have made. If the Spaniards wanted

to find Christ, they needed to look to the Indians they were massacring.

Hence, in the writings of Las Casas, Indians are not pagans, natural slaves, or wild children of nature. They are humans with the capacity for salvation, regardless of the conquistadores' assertion that they were soulless, human-looking, talking animals. The Christian conquerors might have defined Indians like Hatuey as "unbelievers"; nevertheless, the Indians' humanity made them sacred because they contained the *imago Dei*, the image of God. They represented the poor of the gospel, and as such, any gesture made to them was a gesture made toward Christ. To mistreat the native people was to mistreat Jesus. To look into these poor, marginalized, and suffering faces was to recognize the suffering of Christ. To establish power and privilege at the expense of the indigenous populations was to make a mockery of Christ's blood, which was shed in solidarity with the wretched of the earth. Hence, salvation for Las Casas meant crucifying the power and privilege derived from owning an *encomienda*, so that he could authentically accompany Christ in the struggle to liberate the Indians. The *encomienda* system finally ended in the eighteenth century, not due to any theological considerations, but because the economic need of Spain to strengthen its military meant that less of the tributes from the work of the Indians were left for the *criollos* (children of the conquistadores born in the Americas).

Las Casas's praxis in attempting to stand in solidarity with the Indians against the genocide they faced earned him the title "Protector of the Indians." Yet there are those, such as Native American scholar George "Tink" Tinker, who insist that Las Casas "was in the final analysis thoroughly committed to european colonialism and the exploitation of Indian lands and labor. His concession to his

Liberation Theology for Armchair Theologians

christian conscience was to promulgate ‘a greater conquest’ conducted by the church on behalf of his royal majesties in Spain.”⁵ For Tinker, even though Las Casas worked to “protect” the Indians from bodily genocide, he was still complicit in cultural genocide, attempting to destroy indigenous culture and replace it with a “european-centered” value system.

The Rise of Latin America

The Latin American society that Christendom had a hand in creating was divided along strict class lines. At the top of the hierarchy were those born in Spain. They were known as *peninsulares* and mainly occupied top leadership positions within the colonial government and the church. Below them were their offspring born in the colonies. They were



referred to as *criollos*. As second-class citizens, they mostly filled government positions. Below them were the urban white masses, then Indians, and then at the bottom of the social ladder, *mestizos* (offspring of natives and whites), *mulatos* (offspring of blacks and whites), and Africans, along with their descendants.

The early 1800s saw the rise of Latin American nationalistic fervor and the resulting wars for independence, helped in part by Napoleon's 1807 occupation of Spain. The emerging nations sought to maintain the same control over the church that Spain previously held. At the forefront was Christendom, the space carved out by the royal ruling power, which in turn provided religious legitimacy to the existing social structures. Christendom, according to Pablo Richard, shaped a church that bore the marks of slavery, oppression, dependency, and underdevelopment; thus contributing to the colonizing process. For liberation to occur, for the church to be born, Christendom must die.⁶ Not surprisingly, when local elites started the wars for independence, the church, because it was usually the largest landholder and the main conservative political force, was perceived to be an enemy. Even though some priests of the lower clergy cast their lots with the revolutionaries (for example Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla in Mexico), most local bishops sided with the Spanish crown, while popes made proclamations against independence movements in 1816 and 1823.

The poor and dispossessed took up arms in the struggle for independence; however, when the fog of war cleared, their plight was not altered. Rather than the crown and the church, they were now subjugated to the commercial class and local landholders. With victory came laws confiscating the land of those whom the local elites viewed as backward, specifically the lands of the church, religious orders, and

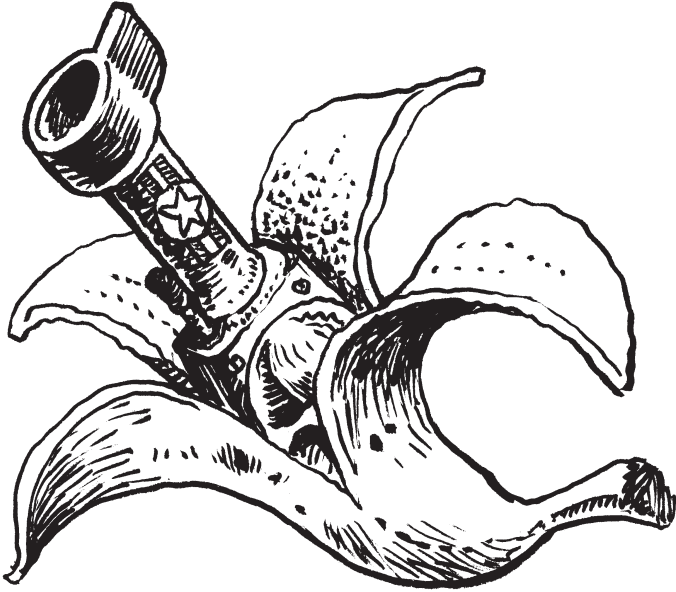
Indians. Over time, the church aligned itself with the interests of the landowning class to counter the rise in the late 1800s of the Liberals, with their pro-European, anticlerical Enlightenment views. Even though independence had been declared, Latin America soon found itself dependent on the economic power first of the British Empire, and then of the United States. This economic subjugation created the conditions throughout Latin America, and especially Central America, that would give rise to liberationist theologies.

Bananas

Before 1870, most Americans had never heard of bananas. In that year, and working independently of each other, Lorenzo Dow Baker and Minor Keith introduced bananas to the American consumer. Within a decade, Americans had gone bananas over bananas. The prospects of tremendous profits led Baker and Keith, along with Andrew Preston, to join forces in 1890 to create the Boston Fruit Company. By 1899, Americans were consuming over 16 million bunches a year. That was also the year that Boston Fruit merged with United Fruit to create the notorious United Fruit Company, the largest banana company in the world, with plantations throughout Central America, South America, and the Caribbean.

Around this time, President Theodore Roosevelt started talking about “speaking softly but carrying a big stick” and practicing what came to be known as “gun-boat diplomacy.” The result was to place the full force of the U.S. military at the disposal of U.S. corporations such as the United Fruit Company to protect their business interests. For example, when Manuel Estrada Cabrera, the Guatemalan dictator, gave the United Fruit Company free reign in 1901 to own land for growing bananas, the U.S. military

Resistance!



made sure that the company's interests remained well protected. Guatemala's subjugation to U.S. corporate interests (hence the term "banana republic") was not limited to Guatemala; every nation within the Caribbean basin (along with several South American countries) were economically and politically subject to U.S. corporate and political interests, even to the point where countries were unable to choose their own leader without the expressed blessings of the U.S. ambassador to that country.

By the 1950s, 70 percent of the land in Guatemala was controlled by 2.2 percent of the population, with only 10 percent of the land available to 90 percent of the mostly Indian population. Most of the land was unused. When Jacobo Arbenz was elected president through a free and

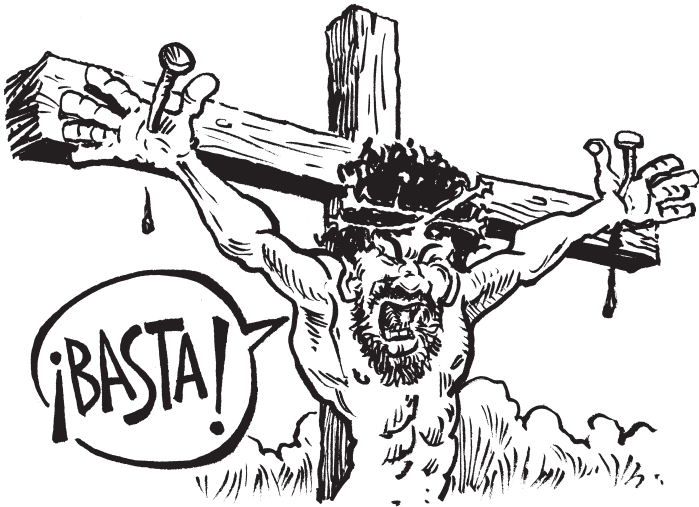
open contest, he implemented modest land reforms to deal with this injustice. However, he ran into one major problem: the United Fruit Company was a major holder of unused land. Not surprisingly, the Eisenhower administration covertly overthrew the democratically elected government of Arbenz and replaced it with a military dictatorship under the pretense that Arbenz was a communist. This led to continuous political unrest over the next thirty years, and hundreds of thousands of people died or disappeared.

Again, U.S. intervention was not limited to Guatemala. During the twentieth century, eleven countries bordering the Caribbean experienced some twenty-one military invasions and twenty-six covert CIA operations whose purpose was to topple their governments, or what we euphemistically call today “regime change.”

¡Basta! (Enough!)

Every so often the poor, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised have had enough. The threat of death that has for generations kept them submissive to the overarching economic and political structures loses its power. They demand change, they demand liberation—regardless of personal cost or sacrifice. In recent history, such moments include the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States, the 1968 Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, the 1989 Autumn of Nations in the former Eastern European bloc, the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests in China, and the 2011 Jasmine Revolution that swept Northern Africa and the Middle East. As people yearn to breathe free, the question remains: What role does the church play? Will clerics stand with the state that oppresses its people, as Christendom has done? Or will clerics stand in solidarity with the oppressed, sharing their fate of dying or

Resistance!



disappearing? Religion can either fulfill the prophecy uttered by Karl Marx and become the opiate of the people, a narcotic that numbs the oppressed to the reality of their sufferings through promises of riches in some future heaven after they die, or religion can raise consciousness.

Liberation theology is a faith that raises consciousness. The historical role Christendom has played on behalf of the state is to convince the masses that they are not the victims of unjust social structures. Rather than religion paternalistically encouraging lethargy and ignorance so that people remain obedient and dependent on political, economic, and social dominance, liberation theology strives to raise critical awareness concerning the unholy causes of oppression. It is a radical manifestation of faith that believes in Jesus' promise of an abundant life, and anything that prevents people from realizing this promise in their lives is not from God, whether it be the state or the church.

Liberation Theology for Armchair Theologians

This abundant life, this humanization, is not limited to those who are oppressed, however; it is also for the oppressor. Those who benefit from the present political and economic structures also live under a false consciousness. They too are dehumanized. They too are in need of liberation. Hence, liberation theology is not a political movement to free the marginalized from oppressive structures; it is a religious movement that strives to bring salvation and liberation to those who fall short of God's will to live abundant and fruitful lives, whether they be the oppressed who are dehumanized or their oppressors who lose their humanity by reaping the rewards from the social structures that privilege them.

Liberation theology is a faith tradition that begins by saying, “¡Basta!”