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The Social Presuppositions of Early Liberation Theology

Michael Landon

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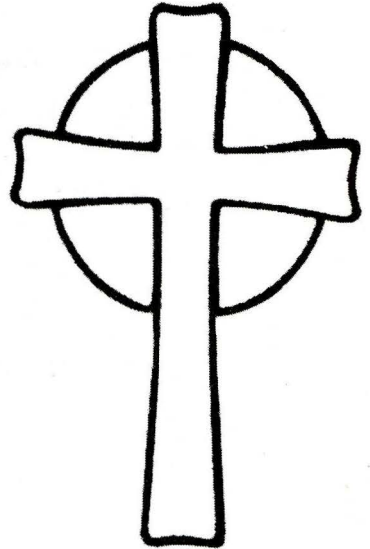
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THE SOCIAL PRESUPPOSITIONS OF EARLY LIBERATION THEOLOGY¹

MICHAEL LANDON

Center for Christian Education

Introduction

Liberation theologians claim that all theology is contextualized, often with unexamined presuppositions. They proudly proclaim to have developed liberation theology from the Latin American experience. This located experience of poverty in Latin America is certainly a significant ingredient in liberation theology, but it seems highly suspect that it would be the only extra-biblical influence on this process of theologizing. The purpose of this paper is to explore some of those other presuppositions of early liberation theology, specifically the social presuppositions.²

This study will be limited in three senses. First, it is limited to liberation theology of the 1970s and 1980s since the 1990s saw new forms of these same economic presuppositions³ and the "New Paradigm" broaden its definition of Poverty.⁴ Second, this study of the social presuppositions of liberation theology will focus on liberation theologians' concept of social sin since it is in this area the social presuppositions appear most clearly. Third, I had the wonderful opportunity to live in Brazil for eight years and to do all the course work for a doctor of theology degree in a liberationist Catholic seminary, Nossa Senhora de Assuncao, in Sao Paulo, Brazil. My understanding of liberation theology is highly influenced by what I experienced in the classroom and the books recommended as most influential by the faculty there.

The first section of this paper will introduce liberation theology and then explain the concept of social sin as used by liberationists. The second, and most

¹ This was presented to the Association of Christians Teaching Sociology, June 2002.

² John W. Cooper, "Teilhard, Marx, and the Worldview of Prominent Liberation Theologians," *Calvin Theological Journal* 24.2 (November 1989): 241-62.

³ Peter G. Moll, "Liberating Liberation Theology: Towards Independence from Dependency Theory," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 78 (1992): 29.

⁴ Pablo Richard et al, "Challenges to Liberation Theology in the Decade of the Nineties," in *New Face of the Church in Latin America* (ed. G. Cook; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 251-52, quoted in Sherron K. George, "From Liberation to Evangelization," *Int* (Oct. 2001): 370. See also Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm* (trans. John Cumming; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

important, section will present six social presuppositions I have perceived in liberation theology's doctrine of social sin, briefly describe the social theory that is the source of these views of society, and critique them. The third section will briefly discuss the relevance of this study to North American theologians and social scientists.

Introduction to Liberation Theology and Social Sin

Liberation Theology

Definitions of liberation theology abound, but good definitions written by liberationists are hard to find. Most simply present liberation theology in terms such as the following:

As an initial description, we may say that liberation theology is

1. an interpretation of Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the poor
2. a critique of society and the ideologies sustaining it
3. a critique of the activity of the church and of Christians from the angle of the poor⁵

This simple definition does not distinguish liberation theology from many other theologies that contain a great concern for the poor, except in reference to the presuppositions read into the term "critique." As I learned in the Brazilian classroom, "critical" and "scientific" always refer to Marxist evaluations: any other explanation is "ahistorical" or not "scientific."⁶ Liberation theologians, however, frequently downplay their reliance on Marxism—"Liberation theology as is it done for example in Latin America is constructed beginning with the oppressed and not with themes or general ideas such as justice, politics, praxis or even liberation."⁷

The Boff brothers' *How to Do Liberation Theology* is more forthright about their presuppositions through the use of Marxist concepts:

Liberation theology was born in the faith confronted with the injustice done to the poor. Not simply the poor individual who knocks on our door and asks for a handout. The poor to which we refer here is a collective, the common classes, which include much more than the proletariat studied by Karl Marx (it is a misunderstanding to identify the poor of liberation theology with the proletariat, as many critics do): it is the workers exploited in the capitalist system; it is the underemployed, those marginalized from the productive system—a reserve army always at hand to replace the employed—it is the ranch hands and squatters, field hands as seasonal laborers. All of this social and historical block of oppressed make up the

⁵ Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology* (Bloomington, IN: Meyer-Stone Books, 1987), 5–6.

⁶ Gustavo Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973), 83, 235

⁷ Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff. "Retrato de Is Anos Da Teologia da Libertacao" *Revista Eclesiastica Brasileira* 46 (1968): 269. All translations of the liberation materials from Portuguese versions are mine.

poor as a social phenomenon. With the light of faith, the Christian discovered here a defiant appearance of the Suffering Servant Jesus Christ.

Here, more than contemplation, is demanded an effective action that liberates. The Crucified wants to resuscitate. We are in favor of the poor only when we, together with them, fight against the poverty unjustly created and imposed on them.⁸

Thus liberation theology is not just a theology that deals with the poverty of Latin America; it is a theology that arises from a certain interpretation of Latin American poverty. My own shorthand version of liberation theology is that it includes four essential elements:

1. A frank acknowledgment of a very real and horrible context of long-term poverty and suffering in Latin America
2. A liberal view of Scripture that sees only part of the Bible as inspired, thus allows liberationists to choose texts that support their agenda and reject the others as later revisions by oppressors
3. A Marxist interpretation of society that allows liberationists to insist on a primarily economic cause of all social problems and a Marxist view of education as developed by Paulo Freire that allows liberationists to view the poor as the source of hope for social improvement.⁹
4. Latin American participation in a long term tradition of European theology in dialogue with European philosophy. It is well known, and I observed it as well, that many (perhaps most?) prominent liberation theologians are either Europeans or Latin Americans who studied at European universities¹⁰

While the Marxist presuppositions of liberation theology are well known, we now turn to liberationists' predominant view of sin, which further manifests their social presuppositions.

Social Sin

Various liberation theologians have different ways of defining sin, but they have a shared understanding of social sin. For Clodovis Boff, sin is "unlove" or "a negative relationship with God."¹¹ For Antônio Moser, sin is "negation of the Kingdom."¹² For Arthur Rich, sin is defined as living in monologue.¹³

⁸ Ibid., 14–15.

⁹ C. Boff and George Pixley, *The Bible, the Church, and the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 195–96.

¹⁰ Enrique Dussell, *History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation (1492–1979)* (trans. Alan Neeley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 244, quoted in Emilio A. Nunez, *Liberation Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 46.

¹¹ Leonardo Boff, "O Pecado Social," *Revista Ecclesiastica Brasileira* 37 (1977): 676, 678.

¹² Antonio Moser, "Mais Desafios para a Teologia do Pecado." *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 40 (Dec. 1980): 682.

¹³ Arthur Rich, "Imperativos Objetivos De La Economia Y Pecado Estructural." *Selecciones de Teologia* 24 (Jan–March 1985): 34. Translated and condensed by Carlos Gonzalez.

Social sin, however, is seen by all to be an objectified evil that is external to the individual and oppressive to the individual.

We say, before anything else, that independent of any consciousness, unjust structures or oppressors are objectively an evil. For this reason, they are "sin" in the material, structural sense. These unjust structures are to the society what lust is to the individual: they carry and even drag one to evil.¹⁴

Also, structural evil is manifested as a personal, objectified evil that has converted itself into a type of "exterior power" that dominates us. More than personal evil, it is the foundation and root of structural evil.¹⁵

Alcalá clarifies the concept through some comparisons. Personal sin is common to us, but sin is "social when it goes beyond the individual and passes to the society." It is "collective when it concerns the collective as subject" and is "structural when it penetrates the social organization."¹⁶ Moser also differentiates aspects of sin. He clarifies that "situation of sin," "social sin," and "structural sin" are all the same,¹⁷ but divides sin into three levels: personal, social-community and structural-cosmic.¹⁸ The relationship between these three levels (which he treats as two—personal and social) are not "either . . . or," but in a dialectic relationship.

The response to that question may possibly not be an alternative—either personal sin or structural sin—but in a dialectical model, which better translates the complexity of the human condition: "On one side, exists 'sin' objectively established in the dominant structures and values of the society; 'sin' which individuals and groups receive from their midst as a fact before any conscious option and which conditions it (the options); on the other side, there is 'sin' subjectively conceived; 'sin' of persons or concrete groups, which constitute themselves, once conscious of some type of 'situation of sin' of the society in which they live, an option which is recognized practically in the conduct oriented to maintain the situation, or—simply—in the omission of the possible action to change it (the situation)."¹⁹

Moser adds that social sin is perpetuated "through organized means, models, symbols, ideas, values, through a collective mentality, finally the individual is molded in almost all his details."²⁰

The Importance of Social Theory to the Doctrine of Social Sin

The basis of this doctrine is social theory, as C. Boff clarifies in his defense of the development of a "new" type of sin:

¹⁴ Boff, "O Pecado Social," 693.

¹⁵ Rich, 37.

¹⁶ Manuel Alcalá, "Pecado Social Y Pecado Estructural." *Razon Y Fe* 112 (1985): 134.

¹⁷ Moser, 689.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 683.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 690–91, citing R. Muñoz, 68–69.

²⁰ Moser, 346.

Why only in our time has the idea of "structural sin", of "situation of sin," etc. been born? It is because man discovered society only two centuries ago. In fact, the "social sciences" (history, anthropology, political science, but most of all sociology) began only in the end of the 18th Century and in the beginning of the 19th Century.²¹

Thus "social sin" is made up of secondary relationships that can be reached only through the sciences.²² In summary, while most of the liberation theologians see corrupted individuals as the source of evil, they see the social structures as the principal carriers/motors of sin.

The Social Presuppositions of Social Sin

The purpose of this section is to begin to recognize and present the social presuppositions of the doctrine of social sin and, consequently, of liberation theology. I have identified the following six presuppositions of liberation theology: (1) society has a life of its own independent of individual control; (2) this independent society dominates and forms the individual; (3) society causes idolatry; (4) the mode of production of a society is the most important determining factor of the society; (5) society is in dialectical tension; and (6) society evolves. The discussion of each presupposition will present evidence of this position in liberation theology, point to possible sources of this view in social theory and critique it.

Presupposition 1: Society (consequently, Social Sin) Has an Existence Exterior to Individuals

Use in Liberation Theology. This presupposition is so basic that often it is not clearly stated; however, several of the citations above express this view. Rich speaks of structural sin, "a type of external power [that] dominates . . . us."²³ Clodovis Boff defines social sin as a human evil that "acquires an existence exterior to the consciousness of individuals."²⁴ Boff even goes to the extreme of denying the existence of the individual consciousness separate from the collective social unit:

Therefore, there does not exist two consciousnesses, one individual (I) and the other social (we). Individualism is a false comprehension of man, incapable of getting to what really happens in man. The I is always inhabited by others. The individual is always an abstraction; in reality, the person always emerges as a complex and active web of relations.²⁵

Multi-national corporations and the international financial institutions are often accused of sin by liberation theologians, whereby they emphasize the inde-

²¹ Boff, "O Pecado Social," 689.

²² *Ibid.*, 690.

²³ Rich, 37.

²⁴ Boff, "O Pecado Social," 693.

²⁵ Leonardo Boff, *A Graza Libertadora no Mundo* (3d. ed.; Petropolis, Brazil: Vozes, 1985), 172.

pendence of these organizations from individual, or even nationally organized political control.

Unfortunately, in many cases this goes to the point that even political and economic powers of our nations, beyond the normal reciprocal relations, are subject to more powerful centers which operate on an international scale. The situation is aggravated by the fact that these centers of power are structured in hidden forms all over and easily escape the control of governments and even international organizations.²⁶

Social Theory. Moser's reference to "a collective mentality" leads one's attention to Durkheim, as discussed below, but it is easy to forget that well before Durkheim, Marx charged that "[t]he individual and isolated hunter or fisher who forms that starting-point with Smith and Ricardo belongs to the insipid illusions of the eighteenth century."²⁷ As Leonardo Boff faithfully applied it, Marx's teaching is that the isolated individual is an abstraction that never existed throughout history.²⁸ This point is fundamental to his development of the determination of individuals by the mode of production of the society discussed in a later presupposition, but here it leads to "the socially determined production of individuals"²⁹

C. Boff's quotation of Durkheim in his article on social sin, "[t]hus, the social is as a thing, independent of the individual, exterior and imposing on him,"³⁰ exemplifies liberation theology's dependence on Durkheim. Although Durkheim may never have used the term, his construction of social theory led many to speak of a collective mind. Cothen, in his preface to Durkheim's *The Rules of Sociological Method*, says, "Durkheim has the advantage, against more modest writers, of believing that he is studying a supermind, immanent in society, which is possessed of superior moral authority."³¹

Durkheim himself spoke of collective consciousness, collective representations, and social facts. The consciousness deals with beliefs and emotions, the representations with conception of relationships, and the social facts with external realities. "In *The Division of Labour*, Durkheim defines 'the conscious collective or commune' as 'the set of beliefs and sentiments common to average members of a society [that] forms a determinant system that has its own life.'"³² The collective representations are both the mode of thinking, conceiving, or perceiving and

²⁶ III Conferencia Geral do Episcopado Latino-Americano: 1979. *Puebla: A Evangelização no Presente e no Futuro da America Latina* (6th ed.; Texto Oficial da CNBB; Petropolis, Brazil: Vozes, 1985), 166.

²⁷ Jon Elster, ed., *Karl Marx: A Reader* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3, quoting Marx, *Introduction to the Grundrisse*, 4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22, quoting Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3, *Introduction to the Grundrisse*.

³⁰ Boff, "O Pecado Social," 690.

³¹ Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of the Sociological Method* (8th ed.; trans. Sarah A. Solovay and John H. Mueller; ed. George G. Catlin; New York: Free Press, 1938), xxx.

³² Steven Lukes, *Emile Durkheim* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 151, citing Durkheim 1902b: 46; translated 1933b: 79.

what it is that is thought, conceived, or perceived, they are “the way in which the group conceives of itself in its relations with the objects which affect it.”³³

Critique of the Social Theory. Van Gennep’s review of Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* criticized Durkheim’s

well-known personal tendency to emphasize the collective element (social) above all else and to put it in the foreground, Durkheim has neglected action, the creator of institutions and beliefs, of various individuals, to which I drew attention in a volume (*Mythes et légende d’Australie*, 1906), which Durkheim conscientiously held to be worthless.³⁴

Van Gennep charges that “Durkheim’s dream is to recognize in society a natural—one might almost say cosmic—reality which would consequently be subject to laws as necessary as physico-chemical laws.”³⁵ It seems that Durkheim is trying to force society into being an organism that obeys the laws of nature and that man can therefore observe and manipulate. Durkheim clearly exaggerates the power of social forces seemingly because of his Enlightenment and scientific paradigm.

For the Christian, one has to admit that the collective view of humans is a dominant feature of life in both the OT and NT and that it has been largely ignored because of our own exaggerated individualism.³⁶ For a biblical point of view on the role of society as an entity with an existence exterior to, and beyond, the control of the individual, the NT term “world” is a fair equivalent. “A basic way of describing evil in the New Testament uses the term cosmos, ‘the world.’ This word refers to the order of society and indicates that evil has a social and political character beyond the isolated actions of individuals.”³⁷ This presupposition of society as an entity with an existence exterior to, and beyond the control of, the individual certainly seems compatible with the Bible.

Presupposition 2: Society (consequently, Social Sin) Dominates the Individual.

Liberation theologians doubt individual determination. Sievernich talks about individuals who are “involuntarily solidly imprisoned in a given situation, in which the individual or people are a carrier of the sinful burden of history.”³⁸

³³ *Ibid.*, 6, citing Durkheim 1901c: xvi; translated xlix.

³⁴ A. van Gennep, “Review of “Les Formes elementaires de la vie religieuse” (1913) in W. S. F. Pickering *Durkheim on Religion: A Selection of Readings and Bibliographies* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 207.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

³⁶ Karin R. Andriolo, “A Structural Analysis of Genealogy and Worldview in the Old Testament.” *American Anthropologist* 75 (Oct. 1973): 1657–65. Bruce J. Malina, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), 38–39.

³⁷ Stephen C. Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 4.

³⁸ Michael Sievernich, “O ‘Pecado Social’ e Sua Confissão,” *Concilium* 210 (1987): 60–72, translated by Valdemar do Amaral, 68.

As seen above, L. Boff even goes to the extreme of denying the existence of the individual consciousness separate from the collective social unit; instead "[t]he I is always inhabited by others."³⁹ Also, as Boff's quotation of Durkheim notes, "[t]hus, the social is as a thing, independent of the individual, exterior and imposing on him."⁴⁰

Some may argue that liberation theology advocates personal involvement, "a preferential option for the poor," that counteracts the power of society.⁴¹ They could point to statements such as the following: "But the individual has his part of the responsibility, exactly in the degree in which he adheres to the 'social sin,' and adhering, internalizes it, and internalizing it, being its corroborator,"⁴² "our duty to fight to turn society more and more just,"⁴³ or to Alcalá's quotation of Marx and following declaration:

It is clear the most orthodox Marxism . . . subordinates human conduct to the economic structure. "It is not the human conscience that determines its being, but to the contrary, it is the social being that determines its conscience" (49). Such an affirmation by K. Marx is unacceptable from the Christian point of view.⁴⁴

Yet immediately before C. Boff's quotation above about individual responsibility, he says, "[t]he responsible for social sin certainly is not the individual, even if he was invested with all its powers. The responsible for social sin can only be the society, whose past weighs terribly on its mind (Marx)."⁴⁵ Moser says,

[b]ut, given what we have written above, we would not dare agree, as it is, with a thought such as this: "Although completely conditioned by physiological, psychological or social determinants, the human behavior can, however, remain free, since liberty, connected to a conscious will, does not abide in the plain of determinants. . . . Experience, in truth, demonstrates that, as strong as the hereditary and ambient forces are, a person can, at times, act in a completely different manner: in this case the personal self determination intervenes, exercising its predominance."⁴⁶

The preferential option for the poor must be primarily political/economic; if not it falls into the category of "volunteerism."⁴⁷ Therefore, the option for the poor, if it is to be genuine, has to move beyond all forms of aid mentality, as expressed in works of charity and campaigns of "social work" or "advancement" for the

³⁹ L. Boff, *Libertadora*, 172..

⁴⁰ Boff, "O Pecado Social," 690.

⁴¹ Boff and Pixley 1989: *The Bible, the Church, and the Poor*, 219-23.

⁴² Boff, "O Pecado Social," 699.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 699-700.

⁴⁴ Alcalá, 139.

⁴⁵ Boff, "O Pecado Social," 699.

⁴⁶ Antonio Moser, "Pecado e. Condicionamentos," in *Grande Simul*, 1975, (Petropolis, Brazil: Vozes, 1975): 349-50, quoting R. Zavalloni *A Liberdade Pessoal* (Petropolis, Brazil: Vozes, 1968), 267.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 700.

poor and needy. It is rather a matter of awakening the poor to their rights and the "noble struggle for justice."⁴⁸

Moser probably presented the dominant view of the individual/society relationship when he pointed out the "dialectical relationship in personal or structural sin."⁴⁹ But in this dialectic, liberation theologians have to emphasize the dominance of the social over the personal in order maintain social change as the priority. Personal change occurs only to the degree that one associates oneself to the cause of social change.

Social Theory. Marx denied the isolated individual as a reality and proclaimed "the socially determined production of individuals."⁵⁰ In *The Division of Labour*, Durkheim defines "the conscious collective or commune" as "the set of beliefs and sentiments common to average members of a society [that] forms a determinate system that has its own life."⁵¹ This determinate system functions through the collective representations, which are "the way in which the group conceives of itself in its relations with the objects which affect it"⁵² and social phenomena, or factors, or forces that are "capable of exercising over an individual an external constraint."⁵³

Durkheim emphasizes that society is dominant over the individual: "[S]ince society cannot exist except in and through individual consciousness, this force must also penetrate us and organize itself within us; it thus becomes an integral part of our being and by that very fact this is elevated and magnified."⁵⁴ Now society also gives us the sensation of a perpetual dependence. It requires that, forgetful of our own interests, we make ourselves its servitors, and it submits us to every sort of inconvenience, privation and sacrifice, without which social life would be impossible. It is because of this that at every instant we are obliged to submit ourselves to rules of conduct and of thought which we have neither made nor desired, and which are sometimes even contrary to our most fundamental inclinations and instincts.⁵⁵

Critique of the Social Theory. As mentioned in the earlier criticism of Durkheim by Van Gennep, Durkheim apparently exaggerates the power of social forces in order to formulate social laws that would have the same power as natural laws for experimentation and improvement.

Christian missionaries readily accept the fact that every society teaches people what to think, feel, and do, often unconsciously, because they have

⁴⁸ Boff and Pixley, *The Bible, the Church, and the Poor*, 195.

⁴⁹ Moser, 690–91.

⁵⁰ Marx, in Elster, 13.

⁵¹ Lukes, 151, citing Durkheim, 1902b: 46; translated 1933b: 79.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 6, citing Durkheim, 1901c: xvi; translated xlix.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 10–11, citing Durkheim, 1901c: 19, translated 13.

⁵⁴ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (trans. Joseph W. Swain; London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1915), 209.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 207.

observed it in their own lives. But the Bible clearly states that truth can come into a person's life and allow one to resist this socialization: "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32, NIV). And perhaps most fundamental, humans are made in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27, 1 Cor 11:7). The Bible clearly states that humans have free will as evidenced by the invitation to obey God instead of following the "world" (Isa 55:1; Matt 11:28).

Thus socialization does occur—societies do form the thinking and behavior of people unconsciously—but its power is limited by both free will and the power of truth. For the Christian, this notion of the overwhelming determining power of the society over the individual contradicts (1) the power of truth, (2) Christianity's proclamation of personal responsibility (Ezek 18), and (3) especially the possibility of personal transformation: Rom 12:2—"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (NIV).

Presupposition 3: The Mode of Production Determines the Society.

Use by Liberation Theologians. Liberation theologians usually speak of "capitalist societies," implying that the economy determines the society.⁵⁶ Although L. Boff admits that "there are other social and cultural variables," it is the economic theory that "adequately captures the fact of dependence."⁵⁷ Later he describes how the mode of production forms the basis upon which the economy, politics, and ideological values are successively constructed:

The manner of encountering material goods establishes a certain type of organization of property, work and economic transactions; it implies, therefore, a form of social relationship between persons in terms of justice, dignity, participation and fraternal solidarity. From the economic base, therefore, the political relationship is structured concerning how to distribute and participate in power and decisions. . . . Upon the economic and political factor an ideological structure is demanded, the hierarchies of values with a function to legitimate the socio-economic relations.⁵⁸

Gutierrez mentions that the economy brings certain values.⁵⁹ This presupposition is further seen in reference to socialism. "Nevertheless socialism is not only a new economy. It should also generate new values which make possible the emergence of a society of greater solidarity and brotherhood."⁶⁰

The ideology also takes on religious trappings. Even the more careful Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops libels the ideology of capitalism: "In Latin America, there are diverse ideologies which demand an analysis . . . liberal capitalism, idolatry of wealth in its individual form."⁶¹ Sobrino speaks of ideologies of "democracy," "private property," and "national security" as gods

⁵⁶ Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 29–30.

⁵⁷ L. Boff, *Libertadora*, 101.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁵⁹ Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 30.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁶¹ III Conferencia, 173.

that bring death to men.⁶² Thus liberation theologians assume that the mode of production forms the society, including the politics, laws, customs, and secular religion (ideology) to justify itself.

Social Theory. This theory is definitely Marxist:

The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.⁶³

Hobson went on to predict the future of capitalism—that due to an intrinsic contradiction (the need to consume everything it produces) the capitalistic society would eventually have to invest overseas in order to continue.⁶⁴ Thus liberation theologians' constant and vigorous reproach of imperialism and great dependence on "dependence theory," as discussed below, are also related to this presupposition, for imperialism was just a natural result of capitalism.

Critique

Durkheim, of course, saw the basis of society to be the collective consciousness, not the mode of production. Weber defends a more holistic causality. Although he encourages the study of the influence of society and economy on religion,⁶⁵ he

first clarifies the influence of the religion on the economy. He urges that we must free ourselves from the idea that it is possible to deduce the Reformation, as a historically necessary result, from certain economic changes. Countless historical circumstances, which cannot be reduced to any economic law and are not susceptible of economic explanation of any sort, especially purely political processes, had to concur in order that the newly created churches should survive at all.⁶⁶

According to Weber, the Calvinist began with his faith in a sovereign God who created the world. Then it followed that the ascetic Christian should work with God to "the organization of the things of the flesh under His will";⁶⁷ thus organization flowed from the spiritual to the material.

Although it is obvious that the mode of production has a strong influence on the formation of the society, Marx's position is so extreme that it is simplistic and lacks a holistic view of man. That the Bible talks a great deal about economics

⁶² Jon Sobrino, *Ressurreição da Verdadeira Igreja* (São Paulo, Brazil: Loyola, 1982), 155.

⁶³ Marx, preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*, in Elster, 187.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁶⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (trans. Talcott Parsons; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 183.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 90–91.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

is surely a sign of its importance and influence over humans, but the Bible would see human life as God-centered. It is God who created the universe (Gen. 1). It is God who owns the earth and all its wealth (Lev 25:23). The God depicted in the Bible is one who is alive and active in human affairs; he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; he is the God who became incarnate. The key duty of humans is to obey God and keep his commandments (Eccles 12:13).

This incarnated God also called his followers out of the "world" to be transformed into his image and to live as a new community practicing *koinonia*. This *koinonia* definitely included a new way of economic life, but the key point is that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were the basis for the new economics, not the reverse.

Presupposition 4: Religion Emerges from Society.

Use in Liberation Theology. Perhaps one of the most confusing elements of liberation theology for most people is its use of Marxism despite Marxism's well-known labeling of religion as "the opium of the people."⁶⁸ The point of Marx's complaint is that religion is used ideologically, that is, to pacify the oppressed.

Liberation theologians speak of an ideology that arises from capitalism and label it idolatry, which would inherently be a false religion. Already cited was the Puebla Conference of Bishops' labeling as idolatrous the ideology of liberal capitalism.⁶⁹ Sobrino labelled democracy, private property, and national security as deities⁷⁰ and describes the sacrifices these deities demand:

The current imperial structures, dependent capitalism and national security, in any of its forms, act as true deities and with their own worship. They are deities because they attribute to themselves the same characteristics which belong only to God: extremity, definity, untouchability. And they have their own worship because they demand the daily sacrifice of the majorities and the violent sacrifice of those who fight against them. These deities need victims to subsist and produce them by necessity.⁷¹

The other side of this emergence of ideologized religion from society is liberation theology's utopian project, its faith in the poor to implant socialism, and from that experience, the emergence of genuine Christianity.

In this way, against all fatalism, we have to affirm also the other pole, which is our duty to fight to make society more and more just, to create structures that are more and more adequate, that stimulate the good and destimulate the bad. And this without falling into the other pole: volunteerism which inevitably leads to millennialism, already denounced by us.

⁶⁸ Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," in Elster, 301.

⁶⁹ *Puebla*, 173. Note the publications that follow this theme: Jung Mo Sung, *A Idolatria do Capital e a Morte dos Pobres (The Idolatry of Capital and the Death of the Poor)* (São Paulo, 1989). Not published in English. Cf. also Hugo Assmann and Franz J. Hinkelammert, *A Idolatria do Mercade* (Sao Paolo: Vozes, 1989).

⁷⁰ Sobrino, *Ressurreição*, 155.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

In fact, even knowing and hoping that the definitive and full Kingdom of heaven will only be installed by God, in the moment he has fixed, we do not weaken in our social project, for the Kingdom of God will not come independent of our collaboration. The "Holy City," the new Jerusalem will not "descend from heaven together with God," "beautiful like a bride dressed for her husband (Rev 21:2), unless the earthly Jerusalem is being built in a push to "elevate to the stars"—to allude to an old Christian hymn.⁷²

The interest in building this present earthly kingdom of God is so strong that some devalue not only the future, but also the past.

Assmann, who may be more radical than most other liberation theologians in this regard, quotes with approval someone whom he calls a "committed Christian," who said, "The Bible? It doesn't exist. The only Bible is the sociological bible of what I see happening here and now as a Christian."⁷³

Social Theory. Weber's warning cited above to forget the idea that the Reformation was the result of economic factors indicates that some were doing so.⁷⁴ Marx—contrary to German sociology, which began with religion when studying man—held that "[m]an makes religion."⁷⁵

Religion is the general theory of the world, . . . It is the fantastic realisation of the human essence because the human essence has no true reality. . . . Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress. . . . To abolish religion as the illusory happiness of the people is to demand their real happiness.⁷⁶

Critique. That all religions are formed by man and are not a result of the existence of a divinity is, of course, totally rejected by Christians, but Paul does speak of the evil "rulers, authorities and powers" that war against Christians. Although Yoder,⁷⁷ Mouw,⁷⁸ and Mott⁷⁹ (1982) tend to demythologize the powers and conclude that they are simply evil social structures, others such as O'Brien⁸⁰ make it clear that the demons can stand behind idols and pervert a nation through idolatry. Deut 32:16–17, 1 Cor 10:20, and Psalm 106:36–39 support O'Brien's point. Demons may use the temptations that come from within man (James 1) to form idols and, subsequently, religious systems. That this happened with idols in less complex societies and happens now with material goods in our secular

⁷² C. Boff, "Pecado," 699–700.

⁷³ Larry D. Pettegrew, "Liberation Theology and Hermeneutical Preunderstandings" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148.592 (July–Sept. 1991): 284–85, quoting Hugo Assmann, *Theology for a Nomad Church* (trans. Paul Burns; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976), 61.

⁷⁴ Weber, 90–91.

⁷⁵ Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," in Elster, 301.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁷⁷ John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

⁷⁸ Richard J. Mouw, *Politics and the Biblical Drama* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976).

⁷⁹ See n. 39.

⁸⁰ P. T. O'Brien, "Principalities and Powers," in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church* (ed. D. A. Carson; New York: Nelson, 1985), 110–49.

society is no question; whether it happens with concepts such as national security and liberal capitalism certainly deserves serious thought.

As for liberation theology's utopian project, few today take such post-millennial views seriously. In fact, one wonders if even the liberationists do. I asked in one class in the seminary in Brazil what would happen if liberation theology succeeded? What if socialism was implanted in Brazil, what would they do next? The response was that they would never succeed and the purpose of a utopian view is not the construction of a new way of life, but the criticism of the status quo. Such a view is part of the reason the fall of communist governments and the expansion of capitalism has had little effect on liberation theology. The point is not to succeed, but to criticize.

Presupposition 5: Dialectical Materialism Dominates Social Relations

Use in Liberation Theology. Already mentioned above were several references of liberation theologians to the global version of class struggle—imperialism. According to liberation theologians, “only an analysis of classes will permit to be seen what is really occurring.”⁸¹ C. Boff and Pixley make it clear that poverty in Latin American is understood as the result of a dialectical process creating dependence for whole nations.⁸² Even the more conservative Puebla Conference of Bishops links poverty with a controlling international mechanism.⁸³

Liberation theology is dependent on the “theory of dependence” as developed by economists such as Andre Frank, Teotônio dos Santos, Celso Furtado, and especially Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto's *Dependência y Desarrollo em A. Latina*.⁸⁴ “The notion of dependence emerges therefore as a key element in the interpretation of the Latin American reality.”⁸⁵ Any other explanation is “ahistorical” or not “scientific.”⁸⁶ The basic point is that “Latin American countries are from the beginning and constitutively dependent”⁸⁷ and are maintained dependent though external control of world markets, national debt, and an internal dominating class linked to the interests of the exterior.⁸⁸

Social Theory. The idea of dialectic nature can be traced back to Hegel, although he seemed to apply it to ideas.⁸⁹ Ricardo applied this dialectic tension to two

⁸¹ Gutierrez, 83.

⁸² Boff and Pixley, *The Bible, the Church, and the Poor*, 7–13.

⁸³ III Conferencia, 70.

⁸⁴ Moll, “Liberating Liberation,” 26–29.

⁸⁵ Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 85.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 83, 235.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 84, quoting from Francisco C. Weffont, *Clases populares e desenvolvimento social*, mimeograph (Santiago, Chile: ILPES, 1968), 26.

⁸⁸ II Conferencia Geral do Episcopado Latino-Americano, 1968. *Conclusões de Medellín* (6th ed.; Sao Paulo, Brazil: Edicoes Paulinas, 1987), 26.

⁸⁹ Robert L. Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers* (6th ed; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 142–43.

classes—the landed and the peasants.⁹⁰ But it was Engels and Marx, as cited above, who changed the world through forming an international working class movement developed from this dialectic between workers and capitalists.⁹¹ With Marx, however, the dialectic was between classes; Lenin developed the dialectic between countries.⁹² And Lenin's theory of imperialism is the root of the theory of dependence.⁹³

Critique. The theory of dependence is very vague. The concepts are “free, ambiguous, with excessive meaning,” the methodology is “not always successful,” and sometimes it seems that the points are “trivial or irrelevant, and at worst political slogans packaged as theory.”⁹⁴ Both the theory of dependence and liberation theology seriously lack empirical data supporting their claims.

In the appendix of Cardoso's book, he comments on the empirical data upon which the theories are constructed.

1. The indicators of some of the dimensions we set about to detect and whose relationships we study are very indirect.
2. The indexes constructed on these indicators do not rigorously fulfill many of the theoretical prerequisites demanded for this construction, especially in regard to the number of items that ought to be considered.
3. The impossibility to conduct tests of validity and trustworthiness of these indexes. . . . But the number of items available for the application of these techniques was insufficient. Between a rigor which would lead to paralysis and a flexibility which could deliver positive results, we decided for the last alternative.⁹⁵

These confessions are rather shocking, especially since these theories serve as a basis for a theology that is trying to revolutionize an entire continent. Also, as Banas points out, “even in the absence of more concrete data,” the theories are affirmed “so categorically, that the reader ends up convinced that the positions have a basis.”⁹⁶

Presupposition 6: Society Is Evolutionary.

Use in Liberation Theology. “Analyzing the capitalist society, . . . Marx created categories which allowed for the elaboration of a science of history. . . . These initiatives ought to assure the passage from the capitalistic mode of production

⁹⁰ Ibid., 85.

⁹¹ Ibid., 152.

⁹² Ibid., 199.

⁹³ Lucio Kowanick, *Capitalism e Marginalidade na America Latina* (4th ed.; Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1985), 68.

⁹⁴ Vilma Figueiredo, *Desenvolvimento Dependente Brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Zabor Editores, 1978), 47.

⁹⁵ Fernando H. Cardoso, *Politica e Desenvolvimento em Sociedades Dependentes* (2d ed.; Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1978), 209–10.

⁹⁶ Geraldo Banas, *Os Donos do Brasil* (Sao Paulo, Brazil: Editora Banas, 1984), 1.

to the socialist mode, that is to say, to one more oriented to towards a society in which man can begin to live freely and humanly."⁹⁷

Gutierrez cites Marx in his discussion of the evolution of society:

What I did that was new was: demonstrate that (1) the existence of classes is linked only to stages of the determined historical development of production; (2) that the class conflict struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat; (3) that this dictatorship constitutes but a transition to the abolition of all classes and a classless society.⁹⁸

Social Theory. Organic evolution was popularized by Darwin, but soon others began to apply the principles to societies. Abraham discusses four variants of social evolution theory: unilinear theory of Comte and Morgan, universal theory of Spencer, cyclical theories of Spengler, Toynbee, and Sorokin, and multilinear theories of Parsons.⁹⁹ Marx and Engels subscribed to a unilinear theory of feudalism, capitalism, and socialism.¹⁰⁰ In their case, evolution refers to the dialectical part of dialectical materialism of Marx—"it envisioned change, constant and inherent change"¹⁰¹ Capitalism had a fundamental contradiction between the necessary individualism of private property and the increasing complexity of capitalism production; therefore, capitalism would necessarily lead to its own downfall and nourish its successor.¹⁰²

Critique. More recent social scientists have largely abandoned the early evolutionary rhetoric,¹⁰³ but not necessarily the use of evolution theory. Despite a commitment to structural functionalism and cultural relativism, most cultural anthropology textbooks still present the material in an evolutionary model, demonstrating how societies progress from simple to complex. Progression from simple to complex is left unspoken, but implied by the format, and "specific evolution" continues, led by Sahlins, Steward and Geertz.¹⁰⁴

As Christians we reject this view that explains history only in terms of cultural evolution. We see history primarily as the arena in which God works out his purposes for human kind. . . . It is not the random record of human activities. It has a direction to it.

The hand guiding this history is God's hand. . . .

There is an overall movement in human history from smaller, less complex societies to larger, more complex ones, but this movement is not linear. . . .

⁹⁷ Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 29–30.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁹⁹ M. Francis Abraham, *Modern Sociological Theory* (Delhi: Oxford Press, 1982), 294–302.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 296.

¹⁰¹ Heilbroner, 145.

¹⁰² Heilbroner, 147.

¹⁰³ William A. Haviland, *Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Holt, Hinehart and Winston, 1975), 32–35; Heilbroner, 300–2.

¹⁰⁴ Paul G. Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 423–24.

Furthermore, this movement of human history will not lead us to an earthly utopia. No advance in morality parallels the development of complex societies and technologies. The bad news is that evil flourishes in complex societies. The good news is that God is also at work in them.¹⁰⁵

Hiebert's comment exposes the troubling presupposition of social evolution—secular humanism. Christianity is not anti-progress, but it is decidedly anti-secular humanism. In the Bible, it is God who is the initiator of covenants, laws, the rise and fall of nations, prophecy, evangelism. In the Bible, human history is moving toward God's intended finale, but not necessarily progressing.

Lessons Learned from This Study

1. In regard to the social presuppositions of liberation theology, biblical critique seems to be mixed. The first four presuppositions have an element of truth to them, but can be overblown. Is there something outside the control of individuals that can influence them toward evil? Yes, the apostle John calls it the "world." Does society or the world have the dominant influence over individuals? It can, especially among the unaware. But the Bible affirms that truth does exist, that Christians can know the truth and be transformed; thus the power of society or the world is limited.

Do economic systems determine the characteristics of societies? On an earthly level, most would favor a more balanced mixed causal relationship among economics, society, and religion. The Bible affirms the importance and power of economics, and the Devil can manipulate them, but God is ultimately in control. Does religion emerge from society? Yes, there are many religious falsehoods that have arisen from men, and even the truth can at times be co-opted by men and used ideologically. But true religion comes from God and can be communicated and understood.

The real issue behind these presuppositions seems to be "Who is in control here?" It is at this level that liberation theology fails. It seems that liberation theologians cannot accept long term, severe poverty in God's providence; thus they demythologize the situation, turning to dialectical materialism, evolution, anything rather than deal with a God that would permit such suffering.

2. North American Christians and theologians are far too ignorant of the social sciences. Many conservative Christians probably avoid the social sciences because of the supposed war between science and the Bible and the fear of becoming "liberal." Yet the Earth is the Lord's, and "the heavens proclaim the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1). Modern science began based on Christian presuppositions about reality,¹⁰⁶ and careful, systematic study of our world has nothing to threaten its creator or his servants. Yoder probably gave the best explanation

¹⁰⁵ Paul G. Hiebert and Eloise Hiebert Meneses. *Incarnational Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 365–66.

¹⁰⁶ Henry M. Morris, *The Biblical Basis for Modern Science* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 29–31.

of the contrasts and the fundamental similarity between social science and the Bible:

Believers have a bigger picture, an older vocabulary and a richer narrative with which to illuminate and guide their alternative modes of struggle and forms of community than the social scientists have, but the story happens and is told and retold in the same world.¹⁰⁷

Because we have been ignorant of the social sciences, we have been unconsciously seduced and twisted by American "dominant institutions and values of bourgeois culture" and have been used to supporting the status quo.¹⁰⁸ "Herberg showed us that, all too often, American Protestant churches have become primarily propagators of American social values rather than advocates of biblical values,"¹⁰⁹ and "the Protestant religious system . . . supports and legitimates the bourgeois position as the ruling class."¹¹⁰

3. Because we North American Christians tend to be ignorant of the social sciences, we do not recognize how our own social presuppositions have influenced our Bible study, interpretation, and theology. For example, "When theologians talk about corporate guilt or the sinful nature of social systems, the members of the middle class do not so much reject their messages as find them incomprehensible. For them, everything is personal and individualistic."¹¹¹

Not only does this lack of social sophistication negatively affect our interpretation of the Bible; Campolo points out that our extreme individualism has kept us from Buber's I-Thou relationships. We do not encounter God, but read from a book. We not only do not experience God; we do not experience other humans fully; instead we use them for our own purposes or simply ignore them, thus contributing to our ignoring the Bible's emphasis on the poor. Liberation theology has done North America and European Christians a favor by pointing out the social presuppositions of our theology and the Bible's emphasis on the poor.

4. Missionaries and Christians from the third world may be our greatest hope for growth in understanding and obeying God.

Any of us who have traveled to Third-World countries have become sensitive to the validity of much of what the liberation theologians are saying. We have come to recognize that there is a severely unequal distribution of wealth that defies justification; that there are millions of people trapped in grinding poverty without any opportunities for escape; that there are political and economic structures in place that create obscene oppression. We have become convinced along with liberation theologians that Jehovah is filled with wrath against the societal systems in which

¹⁰⁷ John H. Yoder, "To Your Tents, O Israel," *Studies in Religion* 18 (summer 1989): 358.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, x-xi, 48-51.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

such injustices are perpetrated, and that He condemns those whose affluence is derived from such conditions.¹¹²

Campolo also points out that evangelical missionaries are developing new economic patterns that go beyond the traditional capitalist/socialist categories. In these small production systems, there is economic freedom (free enterprise); the workers own and distribute the profit among themselves (socialism); the product meets a need; it is produced in ways that encourage community; and the primary objective is not profit, but love (creation of jobs, job training, helping others).¹¹³

Conclusion

Although this report is only a preliminary study, it has demonstrated the use of certain social theories by liberation theologians in their elaboration of liberation theology and the concept of social sin. Most of these theories are easily identified with Marx or Durkheim. Two serious problems appear to have arisen from this study.

First, while many of these theories are acknowledged to portray some truth of social relations, they are also generally acknowledged to be exaggerations. Especially the theory of dependence is very weak in empirical data to support its claims. Yet liberation theologians continue to grasp them, eulogize their usefulness and label alternate theories as "ahistorical" and not "scientific." These theologians, so wise in their concern for/with the poor and in their discovery of ignored words of God, are somewhat careless in their social science. The poor deserve better!

Second, it may be that the real issue behind these six presuppositions of liberation theology is faith in a loving and all powerful God that would allow such poverty to exist for such a long time. The temptation to demythologize history is powerful, but it ends in materialism and humanism. The true problem with liberation theology is theological—God and suffering.

For North American Christians, we need to understand that the Bible is not just true, but also real. It talks about real people who have emotions and act in ways that are very similar to us, and the social sciences can help us understand them and our own situation. We also need to involve ourselves in the social sciences in order to become more aware of our own context and of how we have been shaped by an ideology. We need to involve ourselves in the social sciences in order better to understand the contexts and interpretations of Christians from very different life experiences in poverty and in the "Third World."

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 154–62.