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The Success of Liberation Theology in Argentina and Brazil

by

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Introduction

Liberation theology experienced great popularity in many nations around the world during the twentieth century. This religious and social movement has particular significance in Latin American countries. In this region the liberation theology movement has grown to include almost ten percent of the Catholic population (Vanden 137). Throughout these different countries liberation theology appears in many different forms and in many different aspects of daily life in the region. In some countries the main focus is to create a political movement to effect a substantial change in national politics, while in other countries the concentration is to improve the daily lives of the faithful through community outreaches. Many researchers have claimed that this religious and social phenomenon has greatly affected the politics of Latin America, the organization of the hierarchical Catholic Church, and the individual lives of the citizens. However, little research has been conducted to demonstrate the success of liberation theology in achieving its goals of social change and liberation. There is no conclusive evidence that shows how some methods of liberation theology are more effective in imparting change or which method has had the most success in various social and political settings.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the differing effects of the various courses of action taken by liberation theologians throughout Latin America. It seeks to explain the progression of the Catholic Church and liberation theology, especially in the twentieth century. This project explores various liberation groups and their actions in an attempt to understand the basic principles of liberation theology and its progression from a set of beliefs and attitudes to a sociopolitical and religious movement. Two Latin

American countries that have witnessed significant liberation movements and their effects are Argentina and Brazil. This thesis seeks to illustrate two very different methods of carrying out liberation theology through case-studies of each of these nations. Argentina experienced a great political movement that attempted to alter politics on the national level in order to liberate the poor and oppressed. Conversely, the liberation theology movement in Brazil began at the grass-roots level to build communities and bring aid for the most basic needs. Through these case-studies, this project will present two differing practices that had varying degrees of success. The investigation of the results of the Argentine and Brazilian movements will demonstrate the greater effectiveness of one method of liberation over the other.

### Catholicism in Latin America

The Spanish and Portuguese military conquests of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries brought Catholicism to Latin America. A virtual monopoly of Catholicism was formed in this region. In the beginning, the church had a substantial position in society and also controlled education. For five centuries religious and political authorities were tightly bound together. The Church based its politics on "God's will", or the will of the church officials, rather than on the will of the people. The separation of church and state principle was slow to reach Latin America, so the Church played a large role in the political arena. It began to endorse politics in an effort to maintain power in the region. The struggle for Latin American independence created a crisis for the Catholic Church. It had backed Spain and opposed revolution in the region. Once the liberals and revolutionaries gained control, the Church lost all political control (Vanden 128). The

period of enlightenment also caused problems for the Catholic Church. The philosophy of this era was that no transcendent authority existed, only human logic and reason. This philosophy challenged the basic principles of religious tradition, as the Catholic Church claimed to be the “teacher of truth” empowered by an omnipresent being. The Enlightenment advanced a free market in goods and ideas, creating problems for the Church in underdeveloped areas (Rubenstein 4). During the Nineteenth Century a conflict was present between faith and science. The Church worked with historians and theologians to show that reason and science could be reconciled with religious faith (Rubenstein 2-3).

The Latin American Catholic Church in the twentieth century was characterized by a hierarchical, institutional organization. The hierarchy produces a rigid framework for the church with a powerful few and many subordinates. The church community was marked by two classes of people, the clergy and the laity. The clergy was responsible for teaching, sanctifying, and ruling. The laity had the responsibility to be instructed, sanctified, and ruled (Martin 302). The hierarchy possessed all of the power and decision making abilities for the entire church community. The laity and members of the church had to obey the rules decided upon by the few in the hierarchy. The hierarchical church is characterized by the parish:

“In which the parish priest, juridically nominated by the bishop, administers the sacraments, organizes and determines parochial activities, bases his authority exclusively on his juridical investiture, and does not share it with the faithful, not even those most closely linked to the parish activities. The only limit on the parish priest’s power is his subordination to the bishop. The parishioners can exercise no control over decisions to be taken. They confine themselves to carrying out the tasks and activities thought of and decided upon by the parish priest. The function of the

parish priest, therefore, institutionalized itself as that of boss and administrator and not as pastor.” (Martin 312)

In this parish the initiatives come from the top of the hierarchy down to the people and the power remains in the hands of the clergy. It is institutionalistic and opposed to change. The only role of the laity is to obey (Martin 312). Although the hierarchical function is essential to the church, it does not constitute the entire church.

In the second half of the twentieth century there was a trend toward the liberalization of the Church by the hierarchy (Martin 304). In 1955 bishops from all countries in Latin America joined together to form the Latin American Episcopal Council, or CELAM. This council holds transnational conferences to discuss the changing nature of the Church in Latin America (Cleary 10). The Vatican II council was momentous for the Latin American Church. It has the largest population of Catholics of any regional Church in the world, and this conference marked the first time that they were proportionately represented at a conference (Cleary 18). However, “the Latin American Church did not go to the council as a pacesetter. It went rather as a learner” (Cleary 19). In 1966 CELAM held a conference in Medellín, Colombia. This conference held great significance for the Church, because it recognized the plight of the poor and the need for the Church to intervene. At the conference:

“Change was obviously called for and the church wished to take part in the change. The church chose the side of the poor. It must reach out to them, and to the whole continent. This would be accomplished by evangelization and lay participation (*pastoral de conjunto*) from which grassroots communities (*comunidades de base*) would emerge.” (Cleary 42)

At the conference at Medellín, the bishops made great strides toward liberalizing the Church. Another conference was held by CELAM in 1979 in Puebla, Mexico. At this conference the bishops revisited the topics from the Medellín conference in more detail. One major change that was evident at the Puebla conference was the shift from a hierarchical to a communal church (Cleary 49-50). Thus, "one of the most controversial aspects of the changing Latin American Church has been the emergence of organized movements of Christian radicals who sought to use religion as a base form to transform society through political actions" (Dodson "Liberation Theology" 202). In reaction to this institutional church, base ecclesial communities (CEBs) have formed. These communities bring the basic principles of Christianity to the base level of the Church, to the people of God. The formation of these communities through the region helped to expand the sphere of influence of liberation theology (Boff 1). CEBs became the foundation of some parishes, while in others they were banned. In parishes where the CEBs formed, the laity gained the ability to make decisions for their parish and to control some parish activities (Martin 310). The parishes that allowed the formation of these faith communities created "a church in which the lay people are more and more discovering their rightful dignity and role and where the priests and bishops are discovering the excitement and challenges of being servants on the people rather than their lords" (Martin 316). This shift in power liberated its parishioners from the control of the hierarchy that did not necessarily understand their plight.

### Liberation Theology

Liberation theology was born in the 1960s and 1970s as Christians began to understand the importance of liberation and saw God reflected in this process. Liberation theology starts with “the poor and the threat to life and justice in the Third World” (Cook 246). A new understanding of inequality has emerged as man understands the unequal process of global cultural transformation, of its economic causes, and the relationships that contribute to the inequality. Man has begun to compare himself and his circumstances to those of others. Many consider the unequal distribution and power are caused by factors that are imposed upon them. This inequality based on the actions of others is considered to be oppression (Gutiérrez 22). Man began to seek “liberation from all that limits or keeps man from self-fulfillment, liberation from all impediments to exercise his freedom” (Gutiérrez 27). A struggle for freedom from the oppression of outside factors that controlled the lives of the poor began to empower man to control his own life. Liberation theology found God present in the lives of the oppressed struggling for liberation. An unsettling absence of God was noted in the world of the oppressors, Western Christian culture. The basic principles of liberation are unchanging, because God is always present in the world of the oppressed and is revealed in their struggles for liberation (Cook 247). Liberation theology is characterized by “the struggle to construct a just and fraternal society where people can live with dignity and be the agents of their own destiny” (Gutiérrez 26). It emphasizes that man transforms himself by conquering his liberty throughout his existence and his history. To be liberated, one must be free from all impediments to exercise his freedom (Gutiérrez 27). The need for liberation can



be found in all societies in history, yet its relevance is still important today. The goal of liberation theology is a permanent cultural revolution. Man aspires to escape oppression, and he is only free when he is in control of his own destiny. This theology questions the very meaning of Christianity and the mission of the church, because the Church teaches that God has promised salvation in the next life. However, liberation theology challenges the poor and oppressed to seek liberation from oppression in this life as well (Gutiérrez 36).

During the formation of liberation theology in the 1960s and 1970s, capitalistic nations were involved in “helping” poor nations become more developed. This process forced poor nations to become dependent on the Western capitalist nations. This theory of dependence makes it possible “to develop both a theory and a strategy for liberation evolution of the Third World” (Cook 248). To be liberated the people must be free from their dependency on and the oppression of capitalism, which has become an accepted good that justifies any sacrifice to maintain (Cook 248). Neo-capitalism in Latin America created the existence of “non-persons”, or those who were unimportant in the eyes of capitalistic measures of free trade and profit making. Liberation theology strives to bring God’s salvation to these “non-persons” through hope for liberation from the oppression (Rubenstein 12). It believes that the development of the Third World will only come with breaking the dominance of rich, capitalistic countries over these poor countries. The progress of these “developing nations” is hindered by their dependency on Western capitalistic nations, whose causing of poverty, oppression, and injustice is considered sinful in the Catholic Church (Gutiérrez Theology 35).

This movement depends on the theory that religion must be joined with social action to remedy the plight faced by its people. It has led Christians to denounce social injustice, provide political leadership for marginalized groups, and struggle to change the very nature of the Latin American Catholic Church (Dodson "Liberation Theology" 203). Still, "the tearing down of unjust structures must be accompanied by the building up of a new order" (Dodson "Christian Left" 53). Therefore, radical priests joined together to provide both a spiritual and a political hope for these poor, oppressed communities. They believed that dependence and passiveness must be replaced by profound political participation. Liberation theology emphasizes political participation, self-determination, and the creation of social conditions that are beneficial to all. Under this theology, equality is synonymous with freedom (Dodson "Christian Left" 55).

Although the work of the clergy and the laity in bringing liberation theology was considerable, it never quite changed the Church's traditional role as a stronghold of the status quo in Latin America. Shortly after the liberal priests made headway at the Medellín conference, the conservative sector of the Church began a counterattack. The progress implemented at Medellín was not revoked, but the conservatives regained control. They received another boost when Pope John Paul II ascended to the papacy in 1978. He strongly opposed communism around the world and all movements that resembled Marxism, communism, and socialism such as liberation theology. He stated in his address at Puebla that he opposed a Church in which "the Kingdom of God is emptied of its full content and is understood in a rather secularist sense," that would be achieved "by a mere changing of structures and social and political involvement, and being present

wherever there is a certain type of involvement and activity for justice” (Novak 74). The pope’s greatest action against the movement was the appointment of several new conservative bishops to the region. However the reduced effects of liberation theology cannot solely be blamed on the Vatican. The movement itself is responsible, because it never succeeded in reaching large percentages of the Church (Vanden 137). Another factor that hindered the liberation theology movement and furthered its decline was a changing global political climate. Liberation theology emerged in the 1960s during a period of revolutionary idealism. However, by the 1990s the world began to attack progressive agendas and socialist ideals shown by the fall of socialism and communism in Eastern Europe (Vanden 138). Still liberation theology did have some significant accomplishments. One extremely important achievement was the increase of women in leadership roles throughout the Church. Liberation theology also created a strong presence of the Church in poor and working-class areas that had previously been overlooked (Vanden 138).

The liberation theology movement appeared throughout Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century. However, many differing methods were used to bring liberation to the poor and oppressed in the various countries. Argentina and Brazil share very similar political histories of alternating military and civilian governments. Yet the countries underwent two very different approaches to liberation theology. Through the case studies of each country this thesis hopes to illustrate the varying degrees of success the different methods had in Argentina and Brazil. Each case study begins with a synopsis of the country’s political history to provide background information needed to

understand the changing politics and governments throughout the liberation movement and to illustrate the very similar histories the two countries share. The second part of each case study is a depiction of liberation theology movements and the changes the Church experienced in both nations. This thesis seeks to show that although the countries are very similar, one method of bringing liberation theology to the people far surpassed the other in its ability to create substantial and lasting change.

### Political History of Argentina

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Spanish colonizers settled the land that Argentina currently occupies. The Spanish government of this time considered the economic possibilities in Argentina to be limited, because it lacked valuable natural resources. However, the Río de la Plata area and Buenos Aires became an asset in the prevention of Portuguese expansion. In the eighteenth century the significance of this area continued to grow through increased trade and the creation of a viceroyalty for the region. Between 1810 and 1816 Argentina secured its independence from Spain. However the first two decades of independence were characterized by civil war between Unitarians, who supported a central government in Buenos Aires, and Federalists, who wanted provincial autonomy. This conflict led to immense political instability and economic decline (Vanden 401).

In 1829, Juan Manuel de Rosas was inaugurated as the governor of Buenos Aires. Rosas was a rich landowner from Buenos Aires who identified as a Federalist. His policies allowed traders in Buenos Aires to freely trade and maintain authority to local governments. However, Rosas' regime was unable to generate significant political and

economic change for the region, and he fell from power in 1852. After a short period of internal conflict, the elites in Buenos Aires were able to assert hegemony in the area through the use of force. Their rule is marked by oligarchic political stability, economic growth, and free trade policies. This group resorted to the use of force and fraud to win elections. Political stability aided the economic modernization of Argentina, and by World War I it emerged into the world economy as a major producer of grains and beef. In large cities a large middle-class formed that became disenfranchised by the oligarchic regime. This led to the formation of the Unión Cívica Radical and the Socialist political party which pursued political and socioeconomic changes for the area (Vanden 402).

From 1892 to 1912, Radicals engaged in armed revolts and electoral abstention to force the Conservative elites to concede to their issues. In 1912 the Conservative party enacted a law to establish obligatory suffrage for all adult males and other electoral revisions. The Radicals once again participated in the electoral process which resulted in the election of Hipólito Yrigoyen as president. Yrigoyen's regime marked a time period of political stability with a predominant Radical party. This regime made great political changes to remove the Conservatives from power, yet they did little to change the socioeconomic situation. The Economic crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression greatly affected the Argentine economy. The Radical regime was unable to overcome the disaster and effectively handle ensuing political and economic problems (Vanden 404). A coup d'état, by the Argentine oligarchs, ended the period of political stability and instigated political disarray that would last for five decades. The organizer of the coup, General José F. Uriburu, tried to institute a fascist regime; however, the

oligarchs and military opposed his project. A semblance of a democratic government was established, but the Radical party was banned from participation by coercion and fraud. This allowed the Conservatives to gain power during the 1930s in what was known as the “infamous decade”, due to their inability to handle such international problems caused by the Great Depression and World War II. As a result the importance of the military grew, and discontent arose among the middle sectors of the Argentine population (Vanden 404).

In a takeover in 1943, Colonel Juan D. Perón emerged as a great political leader. In 1944 an associate of Perón’s became president, which allowed Perón to hold the offices of the vice presidency, the ministry of war, and the secretariat of labor. His combined power in these positions allowed him to create a coalition among the military and organized labor. In an attempt to limit his power, he was incarcerated and elections were called. However, Perón was released and easily won the presidency, ending Radical predominance in electoral politics and Conservative political manipulation. Perón’s victory can be credited to the support of the poor, working-class sectors of Argentina (Vanden 405). Perón’s populist policies are marked by state economic intervention, income redistribution, and the nationalization of several sectors of the economy (Vanden 406). Although the Peronist government maintained a façade of democracy, it took on authoritarian practices such as restricting the freedom of expression, controlling the judiciary, and manipulating the mass media. This helped to suppress political opposition and led to a totalitarian regime. Perón’s government improved the Argentine economic policies, and his wife, Evita, helped to extend suffrage to women. Perón even held a

constitutional convention to allow for the reelection of a president, although it was faced by strong opposition. After his reelection Perón faced many struggles as the economy worsened, and he lost popularity due to his authoritarian practices, open confrontation with the Catholic Church, and the death of his beloved wife. In 1955 the institutional Catholic Church and a segment of the military successfully overthrew Perón and replaced him with a military government (Vanden 407).

After the overthrow of Perón, Argentina faced a series of anti-populist civilian and military governments that attempted to reverse the effects of Peronism. One of the most influential authoritarian regimes was that of Juan Carlos Onganía between 1966 and 1970. He dissolved congress, abolished political parties, and integrated the military in an attempt to establish moral and educational reform (Onganía 1). However, none of the civilian or military regimes were able to solve the country's economic and social problems, and the Peronist forces of organized labor survived the political stalemate (Vanden 408). Juan Perón and his followers had been banned from political participation in electoral politics until 1973. Finally the Peronists, but not Perón himself, were once again allowed electoral participation. Hector Cámpora, Perón's nominee, was elected in 1973, and held office until new elections were called to elect Perón and his new wife, Isabel, to the presidency and vice presidency. However, Juan Perón died in 1974. Isabel succeeded him, throwing the country into turmoil through mismanagement and authoritarianism (Vanden 409). After the armed forces overthrew Isabel in 1976, a military regime reigned. It closed all democratic institutions and controlled political life. It began a "Dirty War" against all opposition. Thousands were killed and exiled during

this time (Vanden 411). The military rule also led to Argentina's economic decline and political instability. However, the military government ultimately collapsed and was replaced by a democratically elected administration in 1983 (Vanden 412).

### Liberation Theology in Argentina

In Argentina in 1968 the Movement of Priests for the Third World began to further liberation theology throughout the country. However the purpose of this movement was to initiate political change on a national level. It began in the early 1960s as priests joined the working class to discover the true plight of the poor. "This experiment proved to be a catalyst for politicizing the clergy of Argentina," although initially it was intended to revive the interest of the working-class in the church, and it was originally supported by the church hierarchy. Over time working among the poor helped the priests to see the effects capitalistic dependency has on the poor, underemployed, and unemployed (Dodson "The Christian Left" 54). They saw the church as a means to pacify the people enduring terrible social and political conditions (Dodson "Liberation Theology" 206). The rejection of developmentalism increased among priests who shared similar experiences through the working-priest experiment. With little support from the church hierarchy, the Argentine priests expanded their social roles to include involvement in political movements. The Church responded by suspending priests, relocating them, and even working with the government to deport them. The radical priests had spent a decade among the working class by 1968 when the Third World Priests movement formed (Dodson "The Christian Left" 55).



A main political force among the Third World Priests was Peronism, as Juan Perón had created a government that made great strides among poor laborers and strengthened labor unions. "It was through Peronism that the working class found power and a voice that ultimately transformed it into one of the major players in the country's volatile political and economic life" (Brennan 125). As secretary of labor Juan Perón had not only encouraged the organization of labor and trade unions, but also established collective bargaining rights and favored unions in governmental disputes (Brennan 127). Under the Peronist government the working class experienced a substantial rise in income, gained a sense of self-worth, and began to identify with Perón and his "revolution" (Brennan 128). These values were inherent parts of the liberation movement. Therefore, this organized political faction greatly promoted the Third World Priests' struggle to free the poor from oppression.

Another factor that strengthened the liberation theology movement in Argentina was the ever-changing hierarchy of the church. Conservative bishops were censoring and banning radical priests from parishes, forcing them into others. As priests were expelled from one parish, another radical parish welcomed them. This served to unite radical priests. The severity of the government also made it necessary for the radical priests to band together (Dodson "The Christian Left" 55). Despite the hierarchy's reluctance to accept liberation theology, as early as 1965 there were several important bishops in the hierarchy that had begun supporting the movement (Dodson "The Christian Left" 55-56).

The Movement of Third World Priests in Argentina furthered their liberation point of view and gained attention through their denunciatory role of criticizing current

social and political problems. The movement was most effective in denouncing the Onganía regime and its inability to handle growing social problems. The movement constantly plagued the hierarchy of the church, though never enough to promote collaboration with the governmental regime. This group organized workers' strikes, student protests, barrio protests, and peasant mobilizations (Dodson "The Christian Left" 56). Their peaceful protests were similar to the United States' Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Although the Third World Priests' denunciatory role was visible on the national level, their cause was widely accepted in rural towns and villages. The industrial workers had begun their own political movement, the Peronist movement. "By 1972 the Third World Priests were also a center for the return to electoral politics and full participation by Peronists in national political life" (Dodson "The Christian Left" 59).

Many Argentines began to speak out against the authoritarian Onganía regime. This vocal denunciation continued the trend that the Third World Priest Movement had begun. The authoritarian regime had succeeded in reducing the power of organized labor and changing the socioeconomic culture (Vanden 411). This began to cause discord between the institutional church and the radical priests, because the hierarchy had condoned and even supported Onganía and his regime (Lernoux 1). The Third World Priest movement carefully concealed its views in the Vatican II documents and other documents of the church hierarchy. Therefore, when the government retaliated, it seemed to do so against the entire church, not simply the Radicals. This furthered the rift between the regime and the church (Dodson "The Christian Left" 58).

The denunciation by the liberation theologians was notably effective on the national level. Its organizational abilities were able to unite unorganized workers with the Peronist workers' organization. The Movement of Third World Priests actually used fairly moderate practices, despite their radical views. From 1969-1972 the movement was the center of protests against the severity and repressiveness of the authoritarian regime (Dodson "The Christian Left" 59). The linking of disdain for the Onganía regime and the grassroots of Peronism among the working class gave the movement significant political credibility and influence with the church hierarchy, even gaining an audience with the hierarchy about the liberation point of view. The declaration of San Miguel in May 1969 gave the movement legitimacy and ended the alliance between the church and the Onganía regime, which led to the regime's demise. It also changed the church's point of view from open hostility of Peronism to cautious acceptance and the eventual return of Peronism to politics and electoral participation (Dodson "The Christian Left" 60-62).

Juan Perón's return to power in 1973 was largely due to the help of liberation theology and Peronist movements organized by the Third World Priests. Many alliances were formed with the Peronist movement, convinced it was the way to liberation (Dodson "The Christian Left" 62). However, they overestimated Perón, because he began to leave the liberation and Peronist views out of his politics. Perón's main focus was no longer centered on helping the poor and working class members of society as it had been before. The newly returned president concentrated on rebuilding a strong political base to support his regime. His main issue was to reconcile his regime with the Armed Forces. With their support he could prevent further coups and political opposition (Ciria 36). Many

doubted the success Perón's regime would have for their goals of social change, as he seemed to have forgotten his previous commitment to the lower classes. Nonetheless, some priests continued to verbally support the Perón regime, because it was the "only ray of hope left." By 1973 a meeting was held to discuss the future of the movement (Dodson "Liberation Theology" 218). The Movement of Priests for the Third World lacked a strong grassroots base to endure Perón's political maneuvers, as their movement had been based largely on Peronism (Dodson "The Christian Left" 62). By 1974 the movement had returned to a decentralized state due to various splits in ideology that had formed (Dodson "Liberation Theology" 219). Today the Third World Priest movement is linked only through a shared understanding of the plight of the poor and oppressed (Dodson "The Christian Left" 62).

In Argentina the movement of Priests for the Third World embodied the liberation theology movement and its ideals. However, they were organized to impart political change on the national level. They experienced marginal success in this way with the return of Perón and the raised awareness of social issues among the poor and working-class. However, they based their movement on one political figure and his policies. This proved to be the downfall of their movement. Without the support of Perón or his policy initiatives the Third World Priests had no basis for the liberation movement. They had failed to establish a set of principles and goals toward which they were striving. Plus, the movement lacked a strong grassroots base and made very little change at the local level or in the lives of oppressed individuals that managed to survive the return of Perón. Their achievements remained at the national level. The greatest success of the Third

World Priests was introducing the institutional church to the liberation point of view.

“Thus the Third World Priests helped to change their Church, were a strong voice of protest during a period of national political crisis, assisted materially in discrediting military rule, and helped to promote a return to democratic politics” (Dodson “The Christian Left” 62).

### Political History of Brazil

In 1500 Pedro Álvares Cabral landed in present day Brazil while sailing from Portugal to Asia around the Cape of Good Hope. Still the first permanent Portuguese settlement in Brazil did not appear until 1532 at São Vicente in São Paulo. The Portuguese then established capitanias, or colonies, to harvest brazilwood and sugarcane, which led to a massive influx of slaves to harvest the crops. The politics of the time were controlled by agricultural elites who centered the power in municípios, or municipalities. As Napoleon invaded the Iberian Peninsula in 1808, the Portuguese royalty fled to Brazil, and created a new capital for the empire in Rio de Janeiro. This move marks the first centralized government in Brazil. After the defeat of Napoleon the royal family returned to Europe, leaving Dom Pedro de Braganca in power. In 1822, he gave into requests by Brazilians, and declared the independence of Brazil from Portugal, becoming the first emperor (Vanden 484). Under the 1824 constitution, Dom Pedro I had the power to dissolve the Congress and create a new form of government, which served to unify Brazil. He abdicated the throne in favor of his son, the five-year old Dom Pedro II, who was unable to rule until his fifteenth birthday in 1840. Dom Pedro II created a national assembly with representatives from each province, which allowed the individual states to

rule without much interference by the central government. Slavery was a much debated topic in Brazil. In 1888, acting as regent for her father, Dom Pedro II, Princess Isabel abolished slavery in the region. The following year, led by Marshall Deodoro da Fonseca, the military overthrew the royal monarchy and created a republic in Brazil (Vanden 485).

As a republic Brazil adopted a new constitution that closely resembled the American constitution, including a provision that restricted presidents to one four-year term. There were no national political parties, only parties within each state. Through an unspoken agreement, São Paulo and Minas Gerais traded the presidency every term, as they were the largest states in the nation. National funds were used to build new roads and railways, and Brazil experienced a long period of national growth. There was a national military, but each state maintained a provincial militia under the control of each governor. Opposition to the two power states arose throughout the 1920s by officers of the military. The Depression of 1929 caused an economic decline in coffee production. This allowed Getúlio Vargas, a defeated presidential candidate, to overthrow the government and create a Second Republic in 1930 (Vanden 486).

Vargas remained in power from 1930 until his death in 1954. He successfully centralized Brazilian politics by replacing governors who opposed him with interventors, or replacement governors. A rebellion occurred in 1932, as São Paulo rejected the imposition of an interventor as governor of the state. Throughout his term Vargas saw a large migration to the cities, and he sought to create more urban jobs to preserve political order. Congress elected Vargas to the presidency in 1934 under a new constitution that

did not allow for reelection. However in 1937 with the support of the military, Vargas created the Estado Novo, or New State, and declared himself as the new dictator (Vanden 486). Under his new regime, he eliminated all political opposition and created policies that both controlled labor and maintained its support of the government. He illegalized strikes and lock-outs, but also established a minimum wage and protection for labor. Vargas created an image for himself as “pai dos pobres”, or Father of the Poor (Vanden 487).

During World War II, Brazilian forces joined with American troops to fight in the Italian campaign. This alliance with America fostered a friendship between the nations and helped Brazilians realize a need for industrialization. As the Brazilians were at war fighting dictatorships in Europe, tension began to grow in the nation. Sensing this, Vargas began to develop political parties. In 1945 Vargas resigned and General Eurico Dutra, nominated by the state and land-owners parties, was elected president (Vanden 487). The transition to democratic rule was completed by a new constitution that was written in 1946. However, Vargas was reelected to the presidency in 1950. His regime was marked by economic nationalism and corruption. Vargas committed suicide in 1954, after he was told by the military that he was no longer a suitable candidate for the presidency (Vanden 488).

After Vargas' death, Brazil experienced a period a great economic growth. Juscelino Kubitschek of Minas Gerais was elected to the presidency in 1956. One of his major projects was building the new capital of Brasília in the interior of the country. The automobile industry began, especially among foreign manufacturers. Kubitschek also

created several roads and other important parts of the infrastructure. However, many of these new projects excluded labor and rural areas. Kubitscheck was followed in the presidency by Janio Quadros, who was relatively unsuccessful, and resigned after only seven months. His successor was João “Jango” Goulart, who had been the minister of labor in the Vargas regime and vice president under both Kubitscheck and Quadros. However, he was removed by a military-civilian coup, due to a fear of communism and growing economic problems (Vanden 489).

After the coup that overthrew President Goulart, the military remained in control for twenty-one years. Congress voted Army Chief of Staff general Humberto Castelo Branco as president. Several changes were made to reduce political opposition. The military extended Castelo Branco’s term from 1965 to 1967, abolished political parties, and strengthened the powers of the central executive. Castelo Branco began policies to control inflation, increase national security, and to protect against communism. Still he was defeated in the 1967 election by General Arthur Costa e Silva, a member of a military faction. His regime was marked by a period of significant economic growth in Brazil, known as the “Brazilian Miracle”. He also rewrote the constitution to fit the needs of the military. After a severe brain hemorrhage in 1969, the military replaced him with General Emilio Médici who continued the period of economic growth (Vanden 490). In 1974 General Ernesto Geisel became president with a promise to restore democracy to Brazil. Finally in 1985, Tancredo Neves, a civilian was elected president (Vanden 491).



Liberation Theology in Brazil

After the 1950s the Brazilian Catholic Church experienced a shift in its objectives away from supporting conservative elites and towards promoting social justice among the poor. Several factors contributed to this reorientation of its institutional goals. The Catholic Church on an international level assumed modernizing tendencies as shown through documents such as the Vatican II papers and CELAM documents. Catholicism also began to face increasing competition from secular and religious value movements such as communism and Protestantism. A final factor that helped to turn the Catholic Church towards the poor and oppressed in Brazil was the assumption of power by the severely oppressive military in 1964 (Bruneau 45). At first the Catholic bishops welcomed new regime and saw it as salvation from communism and corruption (Martin 299). However, the decade after the coup in 1964 was the epitome of a bureaucratic-authoritarian state, striving toward economic and political modernization, by means of severe repression (Bruneau 45). This military rule caused many people both in the church and outside of it to face imprisonment, torture, and even death for their opposition to the government. However, the Catholic Church and the bishops were sufficiently organized to withstand this, and they began to speak out against the government. Gradually distancing itself from the repressive military regimes, the hierarchical church became a voice for the poor with an emphasis on reform within the church and society. Bishops began to publish written statements on behalf of the poor and oppressed in an attempt to convince the regimes of the need for change (Martin 305).

The liberation theology movement emerged in Brazil during this period of dictatorial rule, as the Catholic Church provided a haven from the power of the state (Vanden 134). The church had organizational and financial resources that allowed local parishes to provide material and legal assistance for the repressed. It monitored human rights and provided lawyers for those accused of political crimes. It also set up programs to distribute food and clothing to the families of the imprisoned (Vanden 134). During the 1960s much of the Brazilian Catholic Church became committed to liberation theology and comunidades ecclesiales de base, or base communities (CEBs) developed (Vanden 506).

“Throughout the military period, the role of the church as defender of the poor and oppressed was relatively clear” (Bruneau 46). The church assumed a “preferential option for the poor” to provide a replacement for all of the liberal movements that the military regime had repressed (Bruneau 46). The liberal sector of the Church realized it was not their role to speak on behalf of the people for social and political change, but to help the people to speak for themselves. This gave a voice to the laity and the ordinary people, instead of simply the clergy (Martin 306). After the 1964 military coup, movements to help the poor and oppressed were reinforced by a response by the lower classes themselves to the organization of the movement (Bruneau 49).

Another important player in the liberation theology movement was the Conferencia Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil, or the CNBB. Progressives within the hierarchy of the Catholic Church formed this group. It provided active voice for the poor that fought sociopolitical and social justice issues. “[The CNBB] constitutes a network

whereby the institution can promote a variety of sociopolitical issues such as agrarian reform and popular participation in politics” (Bruneau 52). These progressive bishops were instrumental in promoting the formation of CEBs.

These communities arose out of a need for “active, egalitarian, and participative social relationships” (Azevedo 35). However, CEBs did not simply arise from the people, but were the result of a consciousness raising brought forth by clergy and religious working among them (Azevedo 35). The formation of CEBs was the most significant form of liberation theology in Brazil. Close to one hundred thousand CEBs developed by the mid-1980s, and this accounts for 2.5% of the Catholic population in Brazil (Vanden 138). The CEBs grew in Brazil during periods of dictatorial and authoritarian political rule. These types of governments fostered the formation of such communities as an outlet from oppression and restricted opinion (Azevedo 65).

The base ecclesial communities played a large role in the growing awareness of liberation theology on the local level in the poor communities of Brazil. They engaged in a wide variety of activities that helped to improve the daily lives of individuals in the community. One common function of CEBs is charity work, usually involving the collection and distribution of money, clothing, food, and medicine to those who cannot afford it. Their charity work also included running child-care facilities and visiting the sick in hospitals. Bible study is also a popular activity that stimulates greater knowledge of the scriptures, or the new authority on Catholicism (Hewitt 42).

Aside from the traditional activities, the CEBs also foster more innovative practices to further the liberation views. The most popular of these is celebracoes. These

services are similar to Mass, but laypersons rather than priests offer them. This helps to bring the church to its most basic level, with the people of God, rather than limiting authority to the hierarchy.

The final activity undertaken by these communities is community-action projects. These are the most politically oriented functions in which CEBs participate. These projects usually secure basic services, make improvements in the political infrastructure, or gain land titles. Often these include crime watches, food cooperatives, and even CEB promotion itself (Hewitt 43). These activities help to promote Catholicism and improve the lives of the participants at a very basic, yet necessary level.

At the root of the base ecclesial communities in Brazil is the institutional church, which tends to provide guidance for the groups. Although CEBs are “born of the wish of the oppressed” the communities are not independent of the church. One bishop insists that they “are the Church” and are “always united with their priests and bishops” who offer guidance and support for its members (Hewitt 54). The faith based communities are inherently part of the church and its hierarchy. They are obedient to the Church, and in turn the Church recognizes the significance of these groups (Azevedo 66). At times the Church’s control over CEBs is subtle and other times more direct. Regardless, the Catholic Church has considerable control over the activities and functions of the base communities (Hewitt 59).

The CEBs are a very diverse group, composed of different groups of people performing various tasks. Their effectiveness and role in society fluctuates from group to group. Views of the roles of the CEBs also tend to vary widely. Some downplay their

role in social and political matters. For some extreme liberals, CEBs and the Church are “opium of the people” that simply masks that grave problems of society in Brazil and Latin America (Hewitt 81). Many believe that the main function of the communities is political, and is reflected through the electoral sphere with a largely united voting base. They believe these communities can “use their political clout to chart a more just and equitable course for Brazilian society” (Hewitt 82). Some more positive views of CEBs come from the basic principles of the communities. “The CEBs...become [a] privileged vehicle to work with the poor and promote their awareness, mobilization, and organization” (Bruneau 48). The base communities are seen as a force that educates people and motivates them to make changes in the social and political spheres. One bishop expresses:

“To the extent that in the base communities there are conditions for...consciousness to grow, they end up politically involved, stemming from the solidarity expressed with the difficulties of the people from which these communities are born. But the political solutions, the strategies of political action, of syndicated action, are elaborated in nonecclesial instances, with the unions, the political parties, and the various organizations of the popular movement.” (Hewitt82)

Regardless of the varying views of base ecclesial communities, these groups contribute directly to the social and political change in Brazil at the most basic level of the people (Hewitt 90).

The success of the base ecclesial communities is marked by several events and trends that are evident throughout their existence. The power of the Church experienced a shift from the supremacy of the clergy to active participation by lay persons and religious women in work of the Church (Azevedo 245). The communities also fostered a

change from a hierarchical, institutional Church that was seen as a protector and governor to an accepting Church that works to promote change. Another important change was the introduction of change that begins with the people and moves upward through the Church, rather than change mandated from the top (Azevedo 246). “[CEBs] involve the common people in an active way, deal with life in an integral way, vivify the Church, and look openly at the world with critical eyes in order to interpret and transform it” (Azevedo 247). These communities have brought hope to the oppressed in Brazil and help them to realize the alternatives available in the lives.

The formation of CEBs had little effect on national politics. While the members do form a large voting bloc, they are unlikely to endorse a political party or influence politics nationally. The electoral prospects of the faith communities faltered for several reasons. The multi party democracy in Brazil impeded the ability of such a small faction from gaining power. The bishops feared that political endorsements would alienate Catholics who did not share political views with the CEBs would become alienated. The Vatican also discouraged political endorsements and the large role of churches in national politics (Drogus 63). Still in Brazil liberation theology has affected the people at the individual and local level. The widespread appearance of base ecclesial communities demonstrates a commitment to affecting change on an individual and local level with the improvement of the lives of its members. “What the CEBs do, in the most basic sense, is to implement a religiously rooted commitment to this-worldly justice” (Hewitt 106). While the CEBs do create a political force, their impact on the national level is minimal.

Liberation theology here is rooted in the people and their ability to take control of their own lives.

### Comparison

Argentina and Brazil share many similarities in their political histories and their struggles to implement liberation theology among their poor and oppressed citizens. Both nations were settled by European conquerors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Spanish and Portuguese came to the New World in search of riches and in an effort to convert the natives to Christianity. Through the colonization of the region, the Europeans exploited both the indigenous peoples and the natural resources. These newly formed colonies were dependant on their motherlands for economic and political support. By the 1820s both Argentina and Brazil had declared their independence from European ties; still they remained reliant on them for support for centuries. These countries are examples of the dependency theory that creates oppression and prevents freedom for the less developed nation. As long as the countries are dependent on Western capitalistic nations they can never truly be free from the oppression (Cook 248).

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Argentina and Brazil faced periods of economic turmoil and political instability. In Argentina the Radicals and the Conservatives fought for power through any means including corruption and fraud (Vanden 404). Brazil faced continual shifts in the government through internal struggles between the states (Vanden 486). In both instances constant military coups prevented stability in the nations. This constant overturning of one government then another caused severe economic disasters. A constant shift between military and civilian governments

occurred in both Argentina and Brazil throughout the rest of the twentieth century as poor and working classes struggled to achieve liberation.

In both Argentina and Brazil Catholics accounted for a large portion of the population. However in both countries the Catholic Church faced loss of supremacy to Protestant religions and secular social movements. The liberalization of the Catholic Church to maintain its status occurred throughout Latin America. The Vatican II papers and the documents from the CELAM conferences at Medellín and Puebla effected great change in both Argentina and Brazil.

Unstable governments in both nations led to social unrest among the poor and working class. The liberal sectors of the Catholic Church were there to offer support and to help free these people from oppression. These corresponding factors in both Argentina and Brazil make them prime models for a comparative case study. Their similar political backgrounds and parallel experiences with the liberalization of the international Catholic Church provide equivalent settings for liberalization theology to occur.

### Contrast

The methods used in Argentina and Brazil to bring liberation theology to the oppressed varied greatly. In Argentina the movement of Priests for the Third World organized a national movement to bring the ideals of liberation theology to the people by means of the national government. They began to identify with the poor and saw Perón as a bastion of hope for the oppressed of the country (Brennan 125). They organized protests, vocally denounced the government, and created a national political movement (Dodson "The Christian Left" 56). The Third World Priests also struggled to gain the



support of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. The institutional Church was very reluctant to accept the actions of the Third World Priests and the concept of liberation theology. It retaliated by expelling and punishing radical priests (Dodson "The Christian Left" 55). This forced the liberation movement to not only battle the oppressive governmental regimes, but also to contend with the attempts by the hierarchy to quell their movement.

Brazil's quest for liberation from oppression for the least of its society took a very different approach than that of the Argentine priests. The Brazilian clergy sought to impart change at the most basic level of the people. Their main focus was the formation of base ecclesial communities. These CEBs helped the poor and oppressed in their daily lives, rather through huge political changes. The CEBs brought the scripture to a basic level for the people and helped them to gain a new understanding of Christianity and a new awareness of liberation theology (Hewitt 42). Basic needs were met by these communities. Food and clothing drives were organized for those who could not afford it, and community action projects were undertaken to improve the political situations on local levels (Hewitt 43). The liberation theology movement in Brazil through the formation of faith communities benefited from a great advantage. The hierarchical church of Brazil supported the liberation movement and the work that was performed in the base communities. The Church provided support, guidance, and control to help promote the liberation way of life. This allowed the clergy seeking liberation for the poor to solely fight injustice at the local level and help the oppressed to gain control of their

individual lives without struggling to gain legitimacy from the institutionalistic Catholic Church.

### Conclusion

The methods of liberation theology used in Argentina and Brazil varied greatly. In Argentina the movement of Priests for the Third World in Argentina raised consciousness of liberation theology at the national level. Their organized movement helped to bring a return to democratic, electoral politics in the country. Their greatest success may have been bringing the liberation point of view to the hierarchy of the country. While the national campaign in Argentina created a great awareness of the liberation issues, its achievements were limited and did not withstand time. Its reliance on a national political figure and his policies did not prove to be beneficial to the cause. The liberation theology movement in Argentina was not based upon a set of beliefs and principles toward which they were striving, but rather were based on a political movement and bringing one leader back to power. After the decline of Peronism and President Perón's failing to implement liberation policies to help the poor, the Third World Priests' movement faltered. Without a strong connection at the most basic level, their efforts and their movement were unable to outlast the political downfall.

Brazil has experienced great strides in the liberation of its people. The Brazilian base ecclesial communities have helped to raise awareness of social and political conditions of the people. Although it has had little impact on national politics, it has empowered the people to liberate themselves and take control of their own lives. The support of the hierarchy in Brazil greatly aided the success of its liberation theology

movement. The Church provided support and guidance for the movement instead of hindrance and obstacles. The clergy did not seek to create political change on a large scale, but rather to help the poor and oppressed to speak up for themselves and to improve their daily lives. Although the Brazilian communities have not experienced any dramatic political change, their ability to grow and facilitate change in the everyday lives of the poorest and most oppressed citizens has helped it to become a strong and viable religious sociopolitical movement.

The Brazilian method of imparting change at the most basic level seems to be more successful than the Argentine and Third World Priests' struggle to restore Peronism. Starting at the grassroots level helped the Brazilians to establish a basis for the movement and sense of empowerment to the lowest of society; whereas the Argentine movement went directly to the top and had nothing to support the movement when it fell. The Brazilian movement toward liberation theology serves as a model of successfully implementing the principles of liberation theology among the poor and oppressed of a nation. It is important that the movement be based upon strong principles and also enjoy the support of the Church and hierarchy to withstand obstacles and failures that the movement may encounter.

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