

THE CHURCH AND
POLITICAL STRUGGLE:
Faith and Action in Central America

Michael Dodson
Texas Christian University

GUERRILLAS OF PEACE. By BLASE BONPANE. (Boston: South End Press, 1985. Pp. 119. \$8.00.)

CRISIS AND CHANGE. By EDWARD L. CLEARY, O.P. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985. Pp 202. \$11.95.)

VOICE OF THE VOICELESS: THE PASTORAL LETTERS OF ARCHBISHOP OSCAR ROMERO. Translated by MICHAEL J. WALSH. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985. Pp. 202. \$9.95.)

HERALDS OF A NEW REFORMATION. By RICHARD SHAULL. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984. Pp. 140. \$8.95.)

CHRISTOLOGY AT THE CROSSROADS. By JON SOBRINO, S.J. Translated by JOHN DRURY. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1978. Pp. 432. \$12.95.)

Catholics throughout Latin America will soon mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of Pope John XXIII's great papal initiative convening the Second Vatican Council. Some will celebrate the event joyfully while others may express chagrin or regret. Vatican II has proved to be a pivotal event for Catholicism, especially in Latin America, where it revitalized religious life. During the ensuing twenty-five years, the church has taken on a host of new commitments that have led to a serious rethinking of its mission. One important consequence has been the development of liberation theology. The very term now inspires some and alarms others, having become an Orwellian "buzz word" that implies a multiplicity of meanings for diverse listeners.

This essay will offer some reflections on liberation theology, treating it as only one dimension of the multilayered phenomenon that is the changing Latin American church. The viewpoint adopted here is that when Latin Americanists study the church, they need to pay attention to the dynamic relationship between the institution and the belief system that gives it meaning and purpose. Attention must also be given to the bonds that link religious thought with pastoral action. Since Vatican II, Latin Americans have taken a fresh look at Christian

faith and discovered powerful motives for concrete action. They have examined the secular environment with a critical eye and have articulated demands for changing it. As a result, religion has become a potent medium for political dialogue and conflict, and nowhere more so than in violence-torn Central America.

What has the Christian faith to say to the Central American church, in response to the political issues that Central Americans struggle over with such appalling violence, and to North Americans whose religion and politics are complicit in these matters? The books discussed in this essay respond to these questions in an extended commentary on the particular kind of Catholic renewal that Central America has experienced, locating it squarely in the political milieu where it has necessarily been worked out. The books under review particularly highlight the recent experiences of Guatemala and El Salvador. The authors reflect the aura of hope and expectation that typified this period of renewal and seem to wish to see it continue. Theirs are important voices in the dialogue on liberation theology, church, and politics in Central America. Yet these voices today run increasingly against the current. In my view, the weight of authority and opinion in the hierarchy of the Roman church is less and less sympathetic to the experience from which these authors write and is increasingly directed against the goals they embrace. Meanwhile, North Americans are being subjected to the demands of a foreign policy that is overtly hostile to liberation theology and to grass-roots Christian involvement in revolutionary struggles. These realities form the backdrop against which the works at hand will be discussed.

Among the works considered here, Edward Cleary's *Crisis and Change* offers the broadest overview of the changing church. His book is a sympathetic introduction to religious renewal following Vatican II and the changing political involvement of the church. Cleary shows that liberation theology in Latin America is a coherent outgrowth of developments within universal Catholicism and that its intellectual roots can be traced to church councils and papal teachings. He examines the "gradual modernization" of the Latin American church after 1900, showing how the social teachings of a series of popes, from Leo XIII in 1891 up through John XXIII, were aimed at revitalizing the church as a social actor. These efforts bore fruit in the form of *Acción Católica*, a program of social commitment originating in France and Belgium that organized the laity in workplaces, schools, and universities and spread widely from Argentina to Cuba. *Acción Católica* was a response to perceived secularization and was therefore aimed at renewing Christian influence in society. To this end, *Acción Católica* sponsored trade unions, student movements, newspapers, and even political parties, reaching the height of its influence in the early 1960s.

Vatican II set in motion a chain of events that tended to eclipse social programs like Acción Católica. Cleary asserts that for Latin America, Vatican II was the most important event in modern Catholic history. In the early 1960s, the Latin American church was structurally weak and its traditional religious and cultural dominance was being challenged by Protestant competition as well as by appeals from secular groups. The church reflected an organizational paradox. On the one hand, it was extremely decentralized into the local territorial units of each diocese. Little cooperation—and in some cases, little contact—occurred among the dioceses of each national church, much less throughout the region. On the other hand, individual bishops looked primarily to Rome for guidance on doctrine and for assistance with pastoral programs. In this respect, the church was quite centralized in an arrangement that assured a high degree of orthodoxy. Vatican II strengthened interdiocesan cooperation, thereby providing greater coherence for national churches; yet at the same time, it fostered pastoral experimentation, which led to increased doctrinal pluralism.

The Vatican Council's efforts to open the church to the modern world stimulated Latin America's bishops, and the intellectuals who advised them, to invest new energy in their own churches. Their *aggiornamento* took shape at Medellín, Colombia, where the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM) met in 1968 to assimilate and "Latin-americanize" the council's initiatives. Cleary's discussion of the Medellín conference highlights two important innovations that helped change the church and are still in contention today. First, the Medellín conference was organized to have pastoral representation, meaning that delegates were chosen from within functional divisions of the church. This decision yielded much broader representation than had characterized earlier bishops' conferences, thereby adding voices not previously heard at high-level church councils: "it meant that the church would be analyzed and defined from the bottom up" (p. 22). This decision constituted one source of the democratizing process that has generated enormous vitality and hope, as well as widespread conflict and fear, during the last twenty years.

Second, it was agreed that the Medellín conference would adopt a new methodology for carrying out its work. Following the lead of Vatican II's concluding document entitled *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the modern world), participants were to shift from a deductive, dogmatic method to an inductive, exploratory approach to religious and social issues. This choice set the church on a path of discovery that encouraged unprecedented self-examination. The shift in method thus reinforced the organizational shift, giving increased impetus to its democratizing potential. The church began to make room for new

voices to be heard, including those of the laity. Church officials engaged in dialogue with social scientists and encountered Marxism not as a shibboleth to be condemned out of hand but as a practical tool of social analysis. Through such dialogue, the church discovered what its own pastoral agents at the grass roots already understood experientially—that Latin America was not catching up with the First World but was proceeding irrevocably along the path of underdevelopment.

This reality of domination formed the central point of reference from which the theology of liberation was developed. In recognizing the Latin American setting as one marked by domination and injustice, Medellín's mandate to adopt a "preferential option for the poor" occasioned the need to develop new pastoral programs. Such programs typically involved increased emphasis on lay participation, which led to organizing and mobilizing the poor within a new structural unit known as the *Comunidad Eclesial de Base*, or the CEB. The CEBs became a dynamic focal point for the development of liberation themes because these groups brought together the poor and progressive clergy in a context of reciprocal influence, which is to say that priests and nuns were as much evangelized by the poor as the poor were by the clergy. When the clergy applied the methods of *Gaudium et Spes* under these conditions, returning to the sacred Scripture to derive a prophetic interpretation of events, they found themselves led inexorably to denunciation of the grotesque injustices systematically visited upon CEB members by the economy and abuses of political power as well as their own church's tacit complicity in these injustices. Pastoral agents and CEB participants began to interpret the Bible as a repudiation of the systemic poverty and exploitation in Latin America. In the words of Gustavo Gutiérrez, "the existence of poverty represents a sundering both of solidarity among men and also of communion with God" (Cleary, p. 89). According to this view, liberation is a Biblical promise and the church is therefore committed to endeavor to fulfill it. What began as denunciation ended as a demand for political involvement. Thus from the very beginning, liberation theology and CEBs as well have been linked to political issues and hence surrounded by political controversy.

This point is well illustrated in Blase Bonpane's *Guerrillas of Peace*. Although not as well written as others under review here, this book is of interest because it describes one of Central America's earliest experiences of religious radicalization following Vatican II. The book tells the story of the *Cursillos de Capacitación Social* in Guatemala, which (like *Acción Católica* before them) were centered in the universities and founded on principles of anticommunism. The *Cursillos* differed from *Acción Católica* in that members became sharply radicalized by their efforts to engage in prophetic witness, which were met with violent

repression. In this respect, the *Cursillos* became a paradigm of church experience following Vatican II, an experience that was to be repeated in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

To summarize the situation, the *Cursillos* were organized by members of the Jesuit and Maryknoll orders and focused on taking students into the countryside to teach and to learn from campesinos. The project united urban religious elites with rural masses for the first time. Moved by the profound misery they witnessed, the *Cursillistas* soon began promoting campesino organizations and quickly generated a powerful backlash.

In 1967 Archbishop Mario Casariego terminated the *Cursillos*, demanding that Catholic students stay out of politics. But the *Cursillos* continued as a secular movement and established ties with a guerrilla movement known as the *Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes* (FAR). When information on these developments reached U.S. officials, the U.S. Ambassador to Guatemala ordered the expulsion of all U.S. missionaries working with the program, including Bonpane. By December 1967, names of *Cursillo* leaders had appeared on death lists circulated by the secret police, and their headquarters were attacked.

Bonpane's reflections on his involvement in the *Cursillos* provide important insights into the origins of liberation theology, illuminating it as a response to pastoral action within a context of extreme systemic violence. As he points out, when the *Cursillistas* traveled the highlands of Guatemala, the only weapon they carried was the Bible, but it proved to be a double-edged weapon. On the one hand, it turned out to be a weapon against their own security and complacency: "All of us . . . were struck by the purity of Biblical literature when read in the context of the poor." It was impossible to read the Bible with the campesinos "without discussing their right to eat, their right to health, . . . their right to live as human beings" (p. 55).

On the other hand, discussing the Bible's message was viewed by religious and political authorities as a dangerous weapon against the status quo. The military feared the prospect of peasant mobilization, which always raised the specter of revolution. Religious authorities wished to avoid tainting religious activities by contact with Marxism. The *Cursillos* indeed brought these young Catholics into contact with Marxists. Members of the FAR frequently attended meetings of the *Cursillos* and admired the *Cursillistas*, but they predicted that the *Cursillistas* had no future in Guatemala because the government was dedicated to a vast "illiteracy campaign" designed to keep the peasantry subjugated. Because the *Cursillos* subverted this policy, the government would soon crush them.

The FAR members were right in one respect: the *Cursillos* were destroyed by the concerted action of religious and political authorities.

Yet efforts within the church to respond to the social and spiritual crisis brought on by repression were not destroyed in 1967 but were reinforced. Grass-roots Christian communities have continued to struggle and bear Christian witness in the succeeding two decades, and their influence has expanded, penetrating even guerrilla organizations and thereby fostering a Marxist-Christian dialogue in Central America that differs from that in Europe. In Central America, the dialogue has involved participants in a popular struggle rather than remaining a theoretical discussion among intellectuals.¹

By the time Oscar Arnulfo Romero was appointed Archbishop of San Salvador on 3 February 1977, nearly a decade had passed since the watershed events of Medellín. Although the *Cursillos* had been virtually forgotten, similar initiatives had been sustained throughout Central America by Christians determined to implement the "preferential option for the poor." The CEB experiment had spread, and nowhere more successfully than in El Salvador.² The same decade, however, had witnessed accelerating decay in the body politic that had brought the country to the brink of political disaster. A growing campaign of violence was being directed at *campesinos*, one that also affected the church directly. Six priests had been expelled from the country, and Romero's predecessor had been accused of allowing his clergy to preach "communitistic sermons" (p. 4). The powerful oligarchy in El Salvador welcomed Romero's appointment, believing him to be a conservative who would keep the church out of politics. To accomplish this end, he certainly would have had to resist the dynamic grass-roots religious renewal that had been inspired by Medellín.

Romero was installed as archbishop on 22 February 1977, two days after yet another fraudulent election in El Salvador. During his first week, the government imposed a state of siege and the military fired on peaceful demonstrators, killing dozens of them. Before Romero had completed his third week, a young priest named Rutilio Grande, who had been very close to Romero, was gunned down in Aguilares after being targeted by death squads. Romero said soon after, "These days I have to walk the roads gathering up dead friends, listening to widows and orphans and trying to spread hope" (p. 6). Yet oddly enough and in spite of the escalating violence, it was a time of hope. After all, the Catholic church had ostensibly taken sides in Latin America's basic political struggles and had sided with the poor. In El Salvador, a small force of priests and women religious toiled hand in hand with peasants to build the integrity of their religious communities and organize them so as to strengthen their legitimate political demands. During Romero's three years as archbishop, the *Organizaciones Populares* grew and the Christian influence within them deepened. But the regime fought back, displaying limitless will and capacity to use violence, and

the toll within the church rose alarmingly. The situation compelled Oscar Romero to engage in prophetic discernment and denunciation. Although he did not consciously seek the role, Romero became one of the most powerful and poignant voices for liberation yet heard in Latin America. Indeed, this modest, self-effacing pastor became the archetypal Christian liberationist, a man who found in the Bible a more democratized vision of church and society than the ruling elites of his country had ever countenanced.

In his introduction to *The Voice of the Voiceless*, a collection of Archbishop Romero's pastoral letters, Jesuit Jon Sobrino suggests several keys for understanding Romero's approach to his office. For one thing, Romero was prepared to let faith take priority over the magisterium (the authority of the church) and to proceed on the assumption that living in accordance with faith's demands was more important than formal professions of belief. Consequently, he maintained close contact with a broad cross-section of the archdiocese. He was especially mindful of and responsive to the poor: "He tried to answer the real questions that grass-roots Christians asked, and he took their opinions into consideration when he replied" (p. 46). This genuine dialogue with the humble of his diocese enabled Romero to identify with the political aspirations of his people to a degree matched by few Latin American prelates so elevated in the hierarchy.

Moreover, Archbishop Romero was willing to be taught by the poor and to take the church's social teachings seriously. Consequently, he did not deny the fact that church unity would be severely tested by giving prophetic witness in a deeply conflictual society. Instead, he accepted the idea that the demands of the poor were legitimate and that they needed their own organizations to achieve them. His third pastoral letter, "The Church and the Popular Organizations," faced the issue directly by adopting the premise that citizens have an inviolable right to organize. Measured against that standard, El Salvador was seriously deficient: "groups in agreement with the government or protected by it have complete freedom. Organizations . . . that dissent from the government . . . find themselves . . . prevented from exercising their right to organize legally . . ." (p. 90). In Romero's view, this right was one that "no one dare take away, least of all from the poor . . ." (p. 93). His judgment was therefore unequivocal that the authorities must "genuinely widen the narrow area of political discussion and give formal and real hearing to various political voices . . ." (p. 112).

By adopting this position, Archbishop Romero undertook the prophetic pastoral leadership called for at Medellín and in liberation theology. He also joined a bitterly divisive political issue in an uncompromising way. He took sides, giving spiritual and practical encouragement to the poor but grievously offending reactionary elements in Sal-

vadoran society. His position strongly reflected the spirit of Vatican II and Medellín in that it did not seek refuge in an abstract, generalized appeal for unity and reconciliation. He acknowledged the deeply conflictual nature of political differences and group struggle in El Salvador, thereby breaking openly with traditional church practice. Historically, the church had been an important component of the thin veneer of moral consensus that helped bind Salvadoran society together. The high degree of religious orthodoxy and the nonpluralistic nature of both the church and the political order had facilitated this influence. In contrast, Vatican II and Medellín fostered increased pluralism in the church, which encouraged a greater pluralism in politics that was accompanied by a decline in the old moral consensus. Christian faced Christian from different positions within the church. Different pastoral needs were acutely reinforced by increasingly defined lines of political struggle. The prophetic figures who sided with the poor became marked for the violence inherent in that struggle.

In his pastoral letters, Romero penetrated to the core political issue in El Salvador—legitimacy. The nation's political system had long rested on the narrowest of social bases and was obliged to restrict political participation severely in order to endure. The Organizaciones Populares, including the CEBs that were so thoroughly integrated into them, were perceived by such a regime as a mortal threat. For Romero, this brute fact emerged as the most telling indictment of the Salvadoran regime. His fourth pastoral letter, issued on 6 August 1979, applied the judgments of Puebla to the deepening political breakdown in El Salvador. (The third CELAM meetings of the Latin American bishops had been held in Puebla, Mexico, in February 1979. The central theme of Puebla was evangelization, a topic discussed against the backdrop of widespread social and political injustice in Latin America.) In light of Puebla's generalized indictment, Romero concluded that the government of El Salvador lacked the capacity and the will to bring social justice to the country: "The government shows itself quite incapable of arresting this country's escalating violence. One suspects . . . that it tolerates the bands of men who, because of their implacable persecution of opponents of the government, can be regarded as creatures of the government" (p. 120).

These caustic denunciations of the regime's lack of political legitimacy were accompanied by Romero's analysis of economic and ideological causation of political injustice that could be traced to Marxism or the Gospel. He pointed out that the concepts of private property and national security had been exalted to the point of becoming absolutes. In religious terms, they had become a form of idolatry. These idols lay "at the root of structural and repressive violence" (p. 134). Lest anyone miss his meaning, Romero warned specifically against campaigns of

anticommunism that were merely apologies for an exploitive capitalism: "[I]n concrete terms, capitalism is in fact what is most unjust and unchristian about the society in which we live" (p. 146).

Oscar Romero clearly perceived that it was his role to guide Christians who were willing to live out their faith in a time of great violence. His concerns were practical and immediate, and he became immersed in political struggles for pastoral reasons. His ministry was a pure example of liberation theology's call to put the faith of the Gospel into action.

Jon Sobrino's major work, *Christology at the Crossroads*, is not a book that is apt to be read widely. Yet it deserves attention as a stimulating contribution to the new Latin American theology. Those who recognize the importance of liberation theology and wish to understand it and its origins better will find this book rewarding. A large body of work from Latin America now exists that is called "liberation theology," as well as some excellent discussions of it by North American writers.³ At the risk of oversimplification, let me characterize that literature in a few broad generalizations in order to show how Sobrino fits as a "liberationist" and what is distinctive about his work. Liberation theology has been called a political theology because it is as much concerned with God's redemptive action in history as with the contemplation of questions about belief in God. Liberation theology presupposes belief and then asks, "What does faith require of the believer?" The responses of a theology of liberation are two. First, the historical situation of the faithful must be specified because theology is most useful if it is specific to time and place. This necessity has led theologians to undertake an acutely critical examination of society and politics. Second, one must refer to the historical setting in which the faith was initially revealed, which Christians accomplish by studying the Bible. Liberation theology has been closely linked to Bible study in Latin America since Vatican II, and as the children of the Reformation learned long ago, encouraging Bible study among the faithful (democratizing access to God, as it were) can have a disruptive effect on established religious structures. This aspect of the Reformation experience has now appeared in Central America.

In short, historical awareness and careful study of Scripture have made liberation theology extremely sensitive to the Biblical demand for justice. Because it is concerned with justice and follows the lead of the Biblical prophets, liberation theology is preoccupied with sin, but not so much with individual sin per se as with the sin of human will as expressed in man-made structures that dominate, exploit, and oppress. Liberation theology focuses on the structural sin that is an integral part of daily life in Latin America, and it intends to denounce that structural injustice and to mobilize the faithful to combat it. By emphasizing criti-

cal reflection, organization, and action, liberation theology inevitably crosses the boundaries that supposedly separate religion from politics and church from state.

Jon Sobrino's approach to theology conforms to this model. In the preface, he warns that he is unwilling to let Jesus become the symbol of an abstract reconciliation that ignores injustice, "a pacifist Jesus who does not engage in prophetic denunciations." To Sobrino, this view "is nothing else but an attempt to exempt Jesus from the conflict-ridden toils of history" (p. xvii). If Central American Christians "are to incorporate the real truth of Christ . . . into their lives, then they simply must reconsider Christ from the standpoint of their own situation and activity" (p. xxi). In short, *Christology at the Crossroads* is an inquiry into the relationship between the historical Jesus and the contemporary history of Central America.

It may be possible to grasp that relationship by asking what morality Jesus taught and to what end, and what is the significance of his death and resurrection for Christians today. A single theme unifies Sobrino's response to these and other questions. To him, the whole of Christ's moral teaching is aimed at bringing about the kingdom of God. The means to that end is love—not love as mere suffering, as in the crucifixion, but as effective action made possible by the resurrection. Those who would follow Jesus in his faith must recreate the process of living that faith themselves. In this way, any specifically Christian morality must be addressed to matters that are political in nature. Sobrino is advancing a hermeneutical principle here (a perspective from which to interpret the Bible), and for him, any hermeneutics that will comprehend the resurrection "must be political": "This means that it is possible to verify what happened in the resurrection only through a transforming praxis based on the ideals of the resurrection. The elements of misery and protest in the Biblical texts can be *understood* only in an active process of change which transforms the present . . ." (p. 255, emphasis in original).

The key to Sobrino's entire discussion is the resurrection, and the burden of his argument is to show that Christians, above all Christians who hold power, have misconstrued the meaning of Christ's resurrection. He uses the example of the Christians at Corinth and Paul's reaction to them to illustrate what he means. This discussion has a particularly powerful sting because Paul's writing in Romans has so often been used to justify Christian withdrawal from politics.⁴

Within a generation after Jesus' resurrection, Christianity had already spread far and wide through the Hellenist world. The newly converted Christians were enthusiastic in their faith but had already begun to lose a sense of the historical figure of Jesus. They treated his kingdom as though it had already been achieved. As Sobrino says, "the

risen and exalted Christ became so exclusively important that all interest in the historical Jesus disappeared" (p. 279). Under such conditions, faith became abstract and following Christ became merely a matter of "participation in the sacraments" (p. 280). Sobrino reads Paul as rebuking the Corinthians for succumbing to the temptation to turn Christianity into a mystery religion, like any other in the Hellenist world. Today this tendency would be described as Pentecostalism, a religious experience that facilitates escape from hardship and suffering into a "realm of enthusiastic belief, ecstasy, and freedom." In opposition to this approach, Paul insisted that being a Christian means "following Jesus and configuring our lives to his" (p. 281). The error of the Corinthians was to take a dualistic view: "They felt that they would have to live as if they were no longer part of this world if they wanted to live as resurrected beings. . . . Paul corrects them sharply. Living as resurrected beings here in history means living a life of service and self-surrender that leads to the cross. Christians must immerse themselves in this world, serving other human beings in order to overcome evil" (p. 282).

Oscar Romero demonstrated what that commitment truly meant and the cost it could extract from Central American Christians. Romero paid for his prophetic witness with his life. But what does it mean for North American Christians who, as Richard Shaull points out in *Heralds of a New Reformation*, live in a historical setting that differs markedly from that of the biblical story and from Central America? If God is revealed "in the struggle of poor and exploited persons to overcome oppression and create a society in which all can share and participate," then how are middle-class Christians in the United States to know God? Shaull's book is a stimulating effort to come to grips with such a question.

Shaull agrees with Sobrino that Jesus consciously chose to align himself with the earlier prophets, thereby declaring his commitment to the cause of social justice. As the Messiah, he carried on their "messianic vision" that the peace of the kingdom comes with the building of justice. This view denies that the spiritual and material sides of life can be separated, thereby detaching personal salvation from social redemption (pp. 35–48). But that is exactly what First World Christians have done by excessively "spiritualizing" Jesus. The result is deeply ironic because this brand of Christian piety leaves a vacuum that is readily filled in Central America by movements of Marxist inspiration. First World citizens are quick to condemn these movements, which have nonetheless advanced a prophetic perspective with vigor and courage. Moreover, Christians in CEBs throughout Central America have become so thoroughly integrated into these broad popular movements that it has become impossible to make any simple distinction between

Marxists and Christians. Archbishop Romero understood this historic development and responded to the situation with a loving openness to the poor that radically alienated Christians on the right. His ministry and his death thus symbolized the religious and political polarization of Central America.

To find answers for North Americans, Shaull ruminates on Charles Cochran's *Christianity and Classical Culture*, which draws a parallel between Rome in the fourth century and the First World today. The themes uniting the two periods are the decline of empire and the relationship between center and periphery.⁵ When the Romans began to perceive the erosion of authority in their state, they searched anxiously for explanations and remedies. They persecuted Christians and then embraced Christianity as the state religion, but the political situation continued to disintegrate, and the decline of the empire from the heady days of Augustus could not be checked. Following Cochran's lead, Shaull argues that a key problem for the Romans was that "classical culture could not find meaning in change" (p. 61). Because it was committed to preserving the existing institutions and distribution of power, classical culture's only vision was that of an idealized past.

But in the heart of classical culture was a way out of the impasse, and it lay in the doctrines of Christianity. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Christianity offered fulfillment of the ancient messianic tradition. Its "millennial vision" saw God acting in history, promising better things to come, and thereby appreciating social change as a good in which the hand of God can be perceived. Even social disintegration, political decline, and revolutionary ferment can be positive events. This creative reconceptualization comes from the periphery of the empire, from North Africa in the late fourth century or a place like Central America today.

Thus the theology that Latin Americans have been developing offers a new language and a new angle of vision for interpreting the world. Schaull observes, "they speak of the great drama of redemption as the struggle of liberation on the part of the oppressed" (p. 68). Under the influence of Marxism, Latin American theologians insist that it is necessary for Christians to understand how societies work, who has power, and why. Central American Christians recognize that the language of class struggle describes the economic and political conflict raging around them. Because capitalism has been so closely associated with the deepening of inequality and repression, socialism has steadily gained ground against it in their eyes. In short, theological reflection and social criticism combine to produce a political vision that will be democratic according to the needs of Central America. As Shaull concludes, "societies in which the great majority of persons are poor can

become democratic only as the economic order contributes to their well being" (p. 106).

The implications for North Americans are clear. If they insist on identifying Marxism or socialism in Central America with Soviet expansionism, they will not be able to understand the political crisis as Central Americans themselves understand it. Not only does this misperception estrange the peoples of the two regions, it places North Americans in the position of denying one of the richest elements of their own political tradition. Western history is, after all, a history of revolutions, and modern Western history has been distinguished by the spread of demands for democratization. What is central to the democratic experience is that it is ultimately and necessarily self-directing. Democracy cannot be imposed from without but must be developed from within. In Central America, the Organizaciones Populares, guerrilla movements, broad popular fronts and CEBs are all seen as manifestations of the growing demand for democratic participation. They reflect the efforts of Central Americans to join the moving stream of Western history on the same terms as have already been won by North Americans. The prophetic message that liberation theology brings to North America is this: If you allow your faith to be reduced to individual piety "detached from these social struggles, [it] can be seen only as a radical distortion of the Christian message" by the suffering peoples of Central America (p. 72). Such a theology would immobilize North Americans. What is needed is a "second conversion" that would recapture the Biblical vision of identification with the poor and afflicted and thereby enable North American Christians to take their side in the struggle and even follow their lead (p. 86). To put the matter the other way around, these writers ask why North Americans should be reluctant to accept a religious reformation that encourages the fight for democracy in Central America.

NOTES

- 1 This point is especially well developed and illustrated in Phillip Berryman, *The Religious Roots of Rebellion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984). I share the high opinion of this book expressed by Daniel Levine in an earlier review essay. See "Religion and Politics: Drawing Lines, Understanding Change," *LARR* 20, no. 1 (1985):185-201.
- 2 Two informative accounts of CEBs in Central America that highlight the experience of El Salvador are Phillip Berryman, "El Salvador: From Evangelization to Insurrection" in *Religion and Political Conflict in Latin America*, edited by Daniel H. Levine (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 58-78; and T. S. Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1982).
- 3 Two stimulating examples of North American commentary on liberation theology are Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978); and Brian Smith and T. H. Sanks, "Liberation Ecclesiology: Praxis, Theory, Praxis," *Theological Studies* 38, no. 1 (March 1977):3-38.

4. See Romans 13:1: "Everyone must obey the state authorities; for no authority exists without God's permission. . . ."
5. These themes have cropped up prominently in recent works of liberation theology. For example, see Hugo Assman, *Theology for a Nomad Church*, translated by Paul Burns (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976); Enrique Dussel, *History and the Theology of Liberation*, translated by Paul Burns (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976); and Elsa Tamez, *The Bible of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984).