

LIBERATION THEOLOGY FROM A MARXIAN PERSPECTIVE

Margaret Kruk
McMaster University

ABSTRACT

Marx denounced religion in general, and the nineteenth century Christian Socialist movement in Europe in particular, as oppressive forces which can never authentically take the side of the poor in transforming an unjust society. I compare the development of the Christian social movement in Europe to the development of Liberation Theology in Central America to establish whether Marx's criticism of religion applies to the latter. I find Liberation Theology to be markedly different from Christian Socialism in its approach and aims. The authenticity of its commitment to the poor defies Marx's analysis of religion and places Liberation Theology alongside his own efforts to liberate the oppressed.

RÉSUMÉ

Marx a dénoncé la religion en général, ainsi que le mouvement socialiste Chrétien du dix-neuvième siècle en particulier, comme étant des forces oppressives qui ne peuvent jamais véritablement défendre les pauvres en transformant une société injuste. Je compare le développement du mouvement social Chrétien en Europe à celui de la Théologie Libératoire en Amérique Centrale afin de déterminer si la critique de Marx s'applique à ce dernier. Mes résultats démontrent que la Théologie Libératoire est qualitativement différente du socialisme Chrétien, dans son approche et dans ses buts. L'authenticité de sa dévotion aux pauvres défie l'analyse de la religion de Marx et place la Théologie Libératoire avec ses propres efforts à libérer les opprimés.

INTRODUCTION

Can theology liberate? On this issue Marx is unequivocal. According to him, rather than liberating, theology actively oppresses the masses. Yet, in the 1960s, a group of priests started a movement they called Liberation Theology, which leaned heavily on Marx's version of society. Words like alienation, inequality, struggle, and revolution began appearing in the writings of Central American theologians no less often than they appeared in the writings of Marx. Assuming that Marx based his philosophy of religion in historical analysis of the role of the church in society, how does

Liberation Theology fit into his analysis? Is it just another fleeting, misguided attempt at socialism within an inherently oppressive church framework, or does it represent a meaningful attempt at reconciling two old foes, Christianity and Marxism? These are the questions I will address in this paper. Towards this end, I will examine two philosophies and two case studies. In the first section, I will outline Marx's main criticisms of religion, focusing on his sceptical reception of the socialist Christian movements of his time. I will discuss these movements in greater detail in the second section, both to attempt to shed light on possible reasons for Marx's scepticism, and to lay the ground for a comparison with Liberation Theology. Section three will comprise a discussion of the tenets of Liberation Theology, which I will illustrate with a case study detailing the development of Liberation Theology in Central America. Lastly, I will compare the two religious movements to establish the differences in their respective socio-political contexts and goals.

MARX ON RELIGION

Marx describes the development of religion in *Das Capital*. He says that religion does not have its own history; rather, it is rooted in the history of the "real world" -- the economic and political milieu surrounding it. "The religious world", he asserts, "is but the reflex of the real world" (Marx [1867] 1967:83). He goes on to conclude:

And for a society based upon the production of commodities, in which the producers in general enter into social relations with one another ... whereby they reduce their individual private labour to the standard of homogeneous human labour -- for such a society, Christianity with its *cultus* of abstract man ... is the most fitting form of religion (ibid).

Marx believes that the need for religion will exist as long as humans engage in direct relations of subjugation, and will only vanish "when the practical relations of every-day life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellowmen and to Nature" (ibid:84).

In his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx's view of religion is crystallized in the famous statement: "[Religion] is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is a demand for their true happiness" (Marx [1843] 1967:131). He

maintains that, by offering comfort for the masses alienated by their social and economic reality, religion does worse than nothing to change the oppressive situation, but silently abets it. Marx demands that religion must critique earth rather than heaven, and politics instead of theology (ibid).

A closer analysis of Marx's critique of religion shows two distinct facets. The first of these is directed against the Christian doctrine of eschatology, the notion of death and afterlife. The statements quoted above illustrate the essence of Marx's critique of eschatology. The belief in heavenly rewards for a godly life on earth, for Marx, reduces life on earth to a submissive wait for death. This submission transfers the responsibility for restructuring an unjust earthly social order from humans to God. The Protestant notion of grace, with its strong message that God alone, and not our earthly actions, determine our afterlife status, is religion's final step in stripping humans of their ability to improve their life on earth. Indeed, grace, in the Protestant tradition, actively supports capitalism by encouraging the accumulation of wealth, which is seen as a lone sign of grace (Weber [1904] 1958). In contrast to such religious philosophy, Marx's philosophy focuses solely on the person as the agent of change on earth.

The second stream of Marx's critique of religion, he alludes to in the above quote from *Das Capital*. It concerns the relationship of the church to the economic and political powers. He maintains that the church has a long historical association with the oppressors of the masses -- the political and economic leaders. This is almost a truism in reference to the mainstream, institutional church in Europe. Marx encapsulates this theme in his statement in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, "... the parson has ever gone hand in hand with the landlord" (Marx and Engels [1848] 1977:62). Thus Marx contends that this alliance of church and state guarantees that the interests of the church will be the interests of the oppressors, and not the oppressed.

A discussion of Marx's opinion of spirituality and its role in human life is somewhat tangential to my thesis; however, it is interesting to note that Marx is not as clear on this point as he is about organized religion. His "opium of the people" statement, for instance, ends with the cryptic but beautiful metaphor, "Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chain [that is religion], not so that man shall bear the chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that he shall cast off the chain and gather the living flower" (Marx [1843] 1967:132). These words may be interpreted as alluding to spirituality, the "living flower" enchained by religion. This interpretation is difficult to support, as Marx makes few

other references to spirituality in his writings. However, the above quote at least suggests that Marx may not be rejecting spirituality along with organized religion.

It is impossible for me to examine the entire history of organized religion on which Marx's analysis of religion hinges. I have chosen to focus on the European religious socialist movement in the nineteenth century as a case study for two reasons. One is that it occurred at the time that Marx was writing. The second reason is rooted in this movement's superficial similarity to the Liberation Theology movement. Referring to the comparisons between Christianity and socialism which were being made in the nineteenth century Marx said:

Nothing is easier than to give Christian asceticism a Socialist tinge. Has not Christianity declaimed against private property, against marriage, against the State? Has it not preached in the place of these, charity and poverty, celibacy and the mortification of the flesh, monastic life and Mother Church? Christian Socialism is but the holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat. (Marx and Engels [1848] 1977: 63)

Thus, it seems that Marx dismissed Christian Socialism as a liberating force, labelling it an effort to appease the guilt of the oppressors. In the following section I will examine what justification exists for Marx's conclusion by tracing the historical development of the Christian social movement in Europe and in particular, the development of Christian Socialism.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND -- THE CHRISTIAN SOCIAL SOCIAL MOVEMENT

The Christian Socialist movement as such was begun in 1848, the year that Marx published his scathing critique of it in *The Manifesto*. While it appears that Marx was playing prophet in castigating such a recent development, a discussion of its roots sheds some light on his firm conviction that Christian Socialism was not an authentic break from the opiate-like quality of organized religion.

Early in the nineteenth century the Catholic Church in Europe experienced a revival. In hindsight, the revival appears to have been inevitable. For the first time in history, the Church was forced to

confront a democratic, industrial, vastly secular society. The old teachings and ceremonies of the Church no longer convinced the majority of overworked, exploited, and increasingly sceptical Europeans that their interests lay with the interests of an institution concerned only with life in heaven. The universality of the dissatisfaction with traditional Catholicism manifested itself in the remarkable similarity among the Catholic Revival movements in England, France, and Germany (Franklin 1987; Altholz 1967).

In England in 1833, Keble, Newman, and Pusey conceived of the Oxford Movement. It was an effort to bring a Catholic understanding of Christianity into the battle against what Newman called "all-corroding, all-dissolving scepticism" engendered by industry, capitalism, and the growth of science (cited in Franklin 1987:5). The goal of the movement was to depoliticize the Church and to return to authentic Catholic traditions. E. B. Pusey, who recognized that the revival efforts must focus on the modern cities and not comfortable, rural parishes, challenged the Church to "grapple with our manufacturing system as the apostles did with the slave system of the ancient world" (cited in Franklin 1987:7). Pusey also pushed for lay participation in the mass, and for Church funding for charity work in urban centres (Franklin 1987).

Fuelled by his growing fears of the might of the state, Mohler led the Catholic revival in Germany. He saw the church as a cohesive force in a Germany and Europe caught in an age of atomization, fragmentation, and individualism. While he considered the social dimension of the Church as essential, he believed that only its transcendent dimension (and with it, papacy and celibacy) could guarantee its followers a true humanism. Thus, Mohler strongly supported an institutional church and Catholic worship through the Mass. One of Mohler's most creative and revolutionary contributions to the revival of Catholicism was the idea that humans can in some mysterious way participate in their own salvation (Altholz 1967; Franklin 1987).

In France, Dom Gueranger spoke out against individualism and asserted its destruction to be the central objective of the church. Like Mohler and Pusey, he believed that only active participation of the laity in Catholic rituals like the liturgy, the eucharist, and prayer could give those rituals meaning. He saw Catholic ritual as an instrument for overcoming alienation if people could be made to understand it. In essence, the French Catholic revival echoed the themes of the English and German revivals (Franklin 1987). Franklin explains that the Catholic revivals in the three countries were so similar because they all stemmed from the political, social, and economic changes brought by the democratic and industrial revolutions of the late eighteenth and early

nineteenth centuries (1987). He names the "spread of mechanical power, the growth of nationalism, and the challenge to the monarchy" as the main catalysts of the Catholic revival in Europe (Franklin 1987: 59). Although the Catholic revival initially started on the fringe of the Catholic community, after the 1878 death of the ultraconservative Pope Pius IX, Pope Leo XIII recognized it as necessary to the continued survival of the church (Altholz 1967).

Altholz recognizes that the development of an extensive concern for social issues in the beginning of the nineteenth century was "hindered by the preoccupation of Catholics with political rather than social issues" (1967:139). These political issues related to the church's traditional rootedness in the old order of society and its concern over its loss of power in the new order. When the concern for social issues did show itself through the movements I described above, it focused on the reforming of individuals rather than reordering of society (Altholz 1967).

The actual Christian Socialism movement was born in England in 1848 and expanded on many of the social concerns of the Catholic revival. It was created by Maurice, Kingsley, and Ludlow as an immediate response to the threat of a Marxist revolution in England. The leaders focused on changing the society and not the individual. They held a vision of co-operation instead of competition. They called themselves Christian Socialists because they believed that "Christianity and socialism were both expressions of the same principle of human fellowship" (Altholz 1967:140). Before its demise in 1854, the movement was able to achieve some rapport with the workers and obtained some success with adult education and the formation of voluntary societies. The movement received very little support from the established church and in general was hindered by its neglect of the role of the government in changing the social order (Vidler 1965).

The French social Catholic movement was entirely external to the working class. The movement was the brainchild of French aristocrats like Comte Albert de Mun, a royalist politician. The movement in large part represented a backlash to the French Revolution in that it sought to restore the stability and social order that existed before. The aristocrats saw the church as being on their side and used it to organize the workers against the industrial bourgeoisie. Comte de Mun, for one, pressed the government for better working conditions and provisions for the elderly and disabled. In Austria, a similar aristocrat-led social Christian movement later emerged. Karl Lueger, a virulent anti-Semite, led the Christian Social Party in the 1880s. Rather than finding fault with the upper classes, he blamed the Jews for both capitalism and socialism.

Comparable aristocrat-led Catholic social reforms were being carried out in Germany by Bishop Ketteler of Mainz and others (Altholz 1967; Vidler 1965).

This brief overview of the awakening of social concerns in the church of Europe illustrates some of the reasons for Marx's denunciation of a 'Christian Socialism'. Certainly his idea that religion is a reflection of the real world is borne out by the above discussion of the origins of change in the church. The impulse to change seems to have originated in the social, political, and economic context of the church rather than in any inherent desire for reformation. The theologies of Pusey, Mohler, and Gueranger, while introducing a genuine concern for the earthly misery of the people, maintained that the church must become a depoliticized instrument of social cohesiveness and class harmony. From a Marxian perspective, the efforts of the Catholic revivalists, and later the Christian Socialists, effectively blunted the revolutionary fervour of the people with their non-confrontational theologies, and their efforts for minimal improvements to the working situations of the poor (Franklin 1987; Vidler 1965).

Marx's critique of Christian Socialism seems more justified for the Catholic continent than for the Protestant England. It is not entirely clear that Maurice, Kingsley, and Ludlow's English movement was directly connected to the interests of the aristocrats, although indirectly it supported those interests by opposing the industrial bourgeoisie and its efforts to exploit the workers. On the continent, however, the Christian Socialism movement did not fall much short of Marx's label of "the holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat" (Marx and Engels [1848] 1977:63). Although referring to the church of England, Marx could have been speaking of the church of the continent when he said:

The motive, that has so suddenly metamorphosed the gentlemen of the Established Church, into as many knights-errant of the labour's rights, and so fervent knights too, has already been pointed out. They are ... laying in a stock of popularity for the rainy day of approaching democracy, they are ... conscious that the Established Church is essentially an aristocratic institution, which must either stand or fall with the landed Oligarchy (Marx 1853:159).

The clergy of the Catholic churches on the continent realized that, by agitating for an active social policy and thus government intervention in the running of factories and workshops, they could "in effect reduce the

economic supremacy of the middle class ... [and] attract the support from the aristocracy, which was in many countries the mainstay of the Church, and which tended to idealize the pre-industrial, pre-Revolutionary days" (Altholz 1967:151). Apart from the conservative politics motivating the Christian social movement in Europe, the fears shared by the English movement about the rise of socialism and atheism proved a potent catalyst. Aside from these motives, mercenary enough to gladden the heart of any Marxian, another factor guiding the church was the dream of social harmony between the classes, such as was thought to have existed in the medieval Age of Faith. To this end, Pope Leo XIII condemned the notion of class struggle and pronounced property inviolable and inequality of fortunes inevitable. He urged workers to "respect property, fulfil contracts and avoid violence" while urging employers to pay wages "adequate 'to support a frugal and well-behaved wage-earner'" (Altholz 1967:152).

LIBERATION THEOLOGIANS ON RELIGION

To struggle against all injustice, despoilment, and exploitation, to be committed to the creation of a more brotherly and human society, is to live the love of the father and witness to it. The proclamation of a God who loves all men equally must be given substance in history and must become history (Gutierrez 1974:32).

Gustavo Gutierrez is a Peruvian priest and one of the foremost proponents of Liberation Theology. He suggests that the Gospel message is aimed not at abstract, apolitical people, but at the full political members of an unjust, exploitative society. He claims those in power often "fetter the Gospel in order to place it at the services of their own interests" (Gutierrez 1974:33). Like other Liberation Theologians, Gutierrez sees liberation as a necessary objective for people's actions because it allows them to "become history" and thus participate in the process guided by Christ, the "Lord of history" (Gutierrez 1974:33). Poverty, the very condition Pope Leo XIII accepted in 1891 as a consequence of natural inequality of fortunes, Liberation Theologians see as a result of social injustice which is rooted in sin (Gutierrez 1974).

Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, two prominent Brazilian theologians, describe some of the Biblical reasons why religion must see itself as an option for the poor. They name five general motivations: Theo-logical, Christological, Eschatological, Apostolic, and Ecclesiogical (Boff and Boff

1989:44-46). The Theo-logical motivation refers to God's desire to liberate the poor, as shown in his response to the slavery in Egypt: "I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave-drivers" (Exodus 3:7, 9 cited in Boff and Boff 1989:44). The Christological motivation is Christ's choice to side with the poor as evidenced by his parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25, 37 cited in Boff and Boff 1989:44). In the Eschatological motivation, the last judgement -- the time of the final decision about damnation and salvation -- will be decided based on our acceptance or rejection of the poor. The Apostolic motivation quotes the demands of the apostles on behalf of the poor: "The only thing they insisted on was that we should remember to help the poor, as indeed I was anxious to do" (Gal. 2:10 cited in Boff and Boff 1989:45). The final motivation, the Ecclesiological, Boff and Boff ground in the decisions of the Central American Catholic Church, first made at Medellin in 1968 and reaffirmed at Puebla in 1979, when the bishops agreed on the importance of "the need for conservation on the part of whole church to a preferential option for the poor, an action aimed at their integral liberation" (cited in Boff and Boff 1989:46).

Liberation Theologians have borrowed the Marxian term 'praxis' and applied it to the traditional Christian concept of love. They believe that love must be lived, and that love of the poor must be shown by living and working with them for their liberation. In order to make this love more efficacious, Liberation Theologians agree that it is necessary to understand the mechanisms which produce poverty and oppression. To this end, liberation theology is composed of three meditations (Boff and Boff 1984). The socio-analytical mediation is the seeing component. It asks questions such as "whom does current economic development benefit?" and, "what means are used to achieve it?" It attempts to assess reality critically using the method of dialectical structuralism which moves from a) structure to b) a radical critical awareness and to c) liberation (Boff and Boff 1984:5-7). The second, hermeneutic mediation, attempts to place reality within the greater context of faith. It asks, "what is God trying to tell us through these social problems?" While social analysis may use terms like 'structural poverty' in describing a given reality, the hermeneutical mediation sees in that reality a 'structural sin' (Boff and Boff 1984:9). The final mediation is that of pastoral practice. This is the 'praxis', the active participation of the church in liberation. The mediation of pastoral practice attempts to find ways in which the church, a historically inert institution, can best act to bring about the liberation of the poor (Boff and Boff 1984:11).

This brief outline of the philosophy of Liberation Theology addresses some of Marx's criticisms of religion. Firstly, Liberation Theology insists on rereading the Bible from the perspective of the oppressed. Indeed, it

is not afraid to use politically volatile words such as 'oppressed', 'liberation', 'injustice', and others. Secondly, the criticisms which Marx levelled against the eschatological tradition within Christianity, namely that it ignores present day reality in favour of life after death, do not apply to the same extent to Liberation Theology. While Liberation Theology does not lose sight of the day of judgement and life thereafter, it considers the primary role of man to be participation in the transformation of history here on earth. I will address the question of the church's political affiliation in the following case study in which I trace the development of Liberation Theology in Central America.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND -- LIBERATION THEOLOGY IN CENTRAL AMERICA

The Catholic Church was historically part and parcel of the conquest and colonization of the native people of Central America by the Spanish and the Portuguese. In the fifteenth century, Pope Alexander VI adjudicated the division of Latin America between Spain and Portugal, and conferred on their monarchies the right and duty of propagating the Catholic faith. Although many of the conversions to the Catholic faith were forced, and treatment of natives was often cruel, as early as 1512 there were clergy and even bishops which took the side of the Indians. In the sixteenth century, over a dozen bishops distinguished themselves as supporters of Indians (Berryman 1987). In 1543, a Spanish Dominican bishop named Antonio de Valdivieso was appointed bishop of Leon, Nicaragua. He was a famous champion of the rights of the indigenous populations, and demanded that the Governor of Nicaragua, Rodrigo de Contreras obey the New Laws which prohibited slavery. Valdivieso even took his grievances to the Spanish authorities who demanded that Contreras defend himself in Spain against charges of corruption and abuses. When the Spanish council ruled against Contreras in Spain, his sons in Nicaragua rebelled against the Spanish authorities and assassinated Bishop Valdivieso (Foroohar 1989). He is today considered to be one of the precursors of Liberation Theology (Berryman 1987).

Religious figures like Bishop Valdivieso were more the exception than the rule in the first few centuries of European rule in Central America. The social order brought to the colonies from Europe was embodied in the concept of Christendom. Christendom was a state ruled by both civil and ecclesiastical powers, an old tradition in Europe. The two branches of governing power complemented and supported each other. Berryman explains that "civil authority [was] seen as rooted in a

superior order that reached up to the very throne of God" (1987:10). That Christendom was being seriously challenged in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe did not daunt Latin American governors and clergy, who agreed to continue Colonial Christendom. Reflecting the church's political and socioeconomic affiliation, religious institutions such as churches, schools, etc. were to be found mostly in towns, thus affording the rural poor little contact with the official religion (Berryman 1987).

Between 1808 and 1824, the local elites, some of them Spanish and some of mixed blood (*ladinos*), engineered Central American independence from Spain. The motivations for this move were largely economic; at this time Great Britain was becoming an important economic power, and Central Americans were eager to trade with Great Britain directly rather than having to go through Spain. The church was greatly weakened during this time, as many bishops left for Spain to protest the independence. The clergy that stayed was attached by Liberal governments, eager for church land, as being too conservative and standing in the way of development. Instead, Protestantism, which appeared more liberal to the governing powers, was being encouraged to flourish. As a consequence of the death of priests, most Central American countries had to depend on a steady flow of European clergy (Berryman 1987). Over the next century the Roman Catholic Church in Central America experienced varying fortunes, but no ideological changes pertinent to my discussion of Liberation Theology. There continued to be groups of clergy who opposed the church and worked with indigenous people, but they were small and unorganized (Beeson and Pearce 1984).

After World War II, the spirit of the Cold War and McCarthyism had great impact on Central America. The Catholic Church in Central America was in ideological agreement with McCarthy's views of Communism, mainly because Communism represented the final downfall of religion to the powers of atheism. Pope Pius XII urged the clergy to become involved in the fight against Communism, a theme echoed by U.S.-based evangelical churches. Events in Central America, like the peasant unrest in many of the countries, and the installation of the progressive, independent government in Guatemala of Jacobo Arbenz in 1949, brought the spectre of a Communist revolution close to home. This sparked the renaissance of evangelization in an effort to counter the spread of Communism. However, the influx of clergy from Europe and the United States (who were mainly sent into the countryside), brought with it other, unanticipated effects. For the first time in its history, the church's efforts centred on the countryside, and for the first time large numbers of clergy came into contact with the poverty, misery, and drudgery that marks the lives of Central American peasants. The priests and nuns began to realize

just how powerless the peasants are in determining their futures (Beeson and Pearce 1984).

As successive Central American governments continued the process of exploitation and oppression, many of the clergy began a slow and quiet campaign to build civil rights awareness among the peasants. In the 1960s the Second Vatican Council, headed by John XXIII, affirmed that the central mission of the church must be to serve the poor. The papal encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, condemned the "unjust maintenance of wealth by a privileged few at the expense of the mass of their fellow citizens" (Beeson and Pearce 1984:255). Central American clergy saw in this pronouncement an implicit approval of their work with the poor. To a great extent, Honduras pioneered the idea of grassroots evangelization by training lay people as 'Delegates of the Word'. The Delegates were chosen from community leaders of remote villages who then worked in their villages as ministers, guides, and teachers. These people attempted to focus on concrete problems of the people and, through Bible study, to identify these problems with the life of Christ. The clergy also encouraged the formation of agricultural co-operatives, recognizing that co-operatives would bring to the people some control over their work and profits. These events, and similar developments in South America, became the focus of the Episcopal Conference at Medellin in 1968 (Beeson and Pearce 1984).

Medellin consecrated, at the official church level, the discourse on liberation. The theme of the conference was the notion of integral liberation, which included political liberation, and was translated in the hermeneutic mediation as liberation from sin and the effects of sin (Boff and Boff 1984). In 1975, Pope Paul VI cautioned that, while "the church is certainly not willing to restrict her mission only to the religious field and dissociate herself from man's temporal problems" neither is the church willing "to reduce her mission to the dimensions of a simply temporal project" (cited in Boff and Boff 1984:21). This dialectical tension was to mark the next Episcopal Conference at Puebla in 1979 which tried to strike a balance between the two concerns of the church:

In a word, our people yearn for a full and **integral liberation**, one not confined to the realm of temporal existence. It extends beyond that to full communion with God and with one's brothers and sisters in eternity. And that communion is **already beginning** to be realized, however imperfectly, **in history** (Puebla 141 cited in Boff and Boff 1984:36).

Not all the Central American bishops were sympathetic to the cause of Liberation Theology; many chose to retain their ties with their traditional mainstay, the elite. Cardinal Caseriego, Archbishop of Guatemala, for one, until his death in 1983 claimed that "the conclusions of Medellin were optional and that he had opted out" (Beeson and Pearce 1984). Although the church in Central America was not united in its acceptance of Liberation Theology, there were many influential people who espoused the Theology. One of them was Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador who, from 1977 to 1980, used his sermons to denounce the deaths, disappearances, and massacres carried out by the Salvadorean security forces. His death at the hands of a government assassin on March 24, 1980, turned the world's attention to the oppression in Central America, and Liberation Theology's response to it (Beeson and Pearce 1984).

In Nicaragua, in particular, the force of Liberation Theology made itself felt. For years, Catholic clergy worked to organize Nicaraguan people living in rural and urban slums into Christian Base Communities. These Communities fostered group discussion and awareness of the people's role in the shaping of their country's future. Many of these communities co-operated with the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front), a political group protesting the corruption and injustices of the Somoza regime (Foroohar 1989). Beeson and Pearce, along with other Central American historians, feel that the Church played an essential role in the FSLN's overthrow of the Somoza regime in July 1979 (Beeson and Pearce 1984; Foroohar 1989).

CHRISTIAN SOCIALISM VS LIBERATION THEOLOGY: A COMPARISON

There are several similarities between the Christian Socialist movement in nineteenth century Europe and Liberation Theology. The main parallel between the two is their reactionary nature. They both derived their roots from the threat of Marxism and atheism, precipitated by the socioeconomic and political situation of the times. More specifically, to some extent, they both recognized that the social reality of the majority of the people was being neglected by traditional religion, and that it was this very neglect which made the church an increasingly marginal part of people's lives. In addition, both movements encouraged the participation of laity in religious rituals and the formation of religious groups. One last parallel may be drawn between the early history of Christian social concerns and Liberation Theology. This is Mohler's admission that human beings are in some way responsible for their

salvation. While this was not accepted by all Christian Socialists, and was rejected outright by the institutional church, it does offer an interesting connection for the Liberation Theology beliefs regarding the participation of the people in history.

On the other hand, there are many basic differences between Christian Socialism, especially as it was practised on the continent, and Liberation Theology. Perhaps the most dramatic difference was the belief espoused by proponents of Christian Socialism on the continent that inequality of fortunes is inevitable and that it is the role of the church to help workers accept their fates and co-exist in harmony with the upper classes. In contrast, Liberation Theology is grounded in the belief that social and economic injustices are not ethically neutral, indeed they represent sin, and must be overcome. While promoting violent revolution is inconsistent with Christian religious beliefs in general, Liberation Theology does aim to reorder society through honing awareness of people's rights in demanding justice from the state, rather than aiming to reform individuals. A second difference is the political affiliations of the two movements. The Social Christian movement in continental Europe was largely the work of aristocrats eager to destabilize the industrial bourgeoisie. The church supported the movement mainly because it saw itself fading from the hearts and minds of its overworked and increasingly secular flock, and also because the movement echoed the interests of the aristocracy, whose support was essential to the church. Liberation Theology calls itself the option for the poor, and its theoretical basis affirms a break with the powerful few, in favour of uniting with the powerless many. While it has to be admitted that not all the church hierarchies in Central America have accepted this break with the governing powers, clergy who accept Liberation Theology have been faithful to the above directive. Furthermore, the accomplishments of Liberation Theology in Nicaragua, and to a lesser extent in other countries, in opposing and even overturning powerful capitalist regimes is direct proof of its political affiliation with the poor.

Another important difference between Christian Socialism and Liberation Theology is the direction their actions took. Christian Socialists in France, England, Germany, and Austria concentrated much of their energies on petitioning the government for change on behalf of the workers, while Liberation Theologians in Central America work to radicalize the awareness of the people themselves with regards to their capacity to effect change. Lastly, one of the main factors limiting the effectiveness of Social Christianity was its narrow vision of what was to blame for the workers' problems. Even the efforts of Christian Socialists

in England, however well meant, never anticipated the extent of social restructuring that would be necessary to effect positive change in the lives of the industrial workers. Liberation Theology, on the other hand, sees as its final goal the transformation of history through the peasants' participation in their liberation.

CONCLUSION

I began with the question, can theology liberate? I believe that the tenets of Liberation Theology and its application in Central America show that theology can act as a liberating force. More complicated is the question of how Liberation Theology would fit into a Marxian interpretation of the role of religion and, consequently, whether it would deserve the criticisms Marx had of Christian Socialism. It is perhaps easiest to reconcile Liberation Theology with Marx's analysis of the motivations guiding the development of religion. It is true that, like Christian Socialism, Liberation Theology is born of socioeconomic imperatives. However, that in itself need not be a criticism if Liberation Theology is actively fighting the very conditions which made it necessary. I have shown in the above section that Liberation Theology is markedly different from Christian Socialism in the areas of political affiliation and interpretation of the eschatological tradition. In this sense, I do not believe that Marx could place it in the same category with Christian Socialism. Indeed, I do not believe that Marx's philosophy of religion has any room for a true Theology of Liberation and, thus, it could not have predicted the development of Liberation Theology as it occurred in Central America.

I have mentioned in my second section that, although it is difficult to pin down Marx's thoughts on personal spirituality, it is possible that he does not entirely reject the notion. However, I believe that his virulent antipathy towards all expressions of religion obstructed his vision of the human need for spirituality that offers a link to transcending earthly existence. While his estimation of the historical role of the church in helping to oppress the masses is essentially correct for his time and place, it loses a great deal of relevance when applied to twentieth century Central America. In partial defence of Marx, it is important to note that Liberation Theology could not likely have been born in the secular First World which was the object of Marx's analysis. It derives its radical and religious character from both the extreme socioeconomic misery, and the strong and pervasive Christian belief, in the Third World. There is another way in which Liberation Theology is unique. There exists little historical precedent for the export of an important philosophy from the

Third World to the First, but that is exactly what is happening with Liberation Theology, which, in North America, is being adopted by oppressed groups such as blacks and feminists (Boff and Boff 1989).

Liberation Theology need not be in opposition to Marxism. They both attempt to liberate humans from oppression and allow them to participate fully in history. Erich Fromm, in his book *Marx's Concept of Man* quotes Marx, who could have been referring to Liberation Theology when he said:

It [socialism] is the *definitive* resolution of the antagonism between man and nature, and man and man. It is the true solution of the conflict between existence and essence, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species. It is a solution of the riddle of history and knows itself to be this solution (Marx cited in Fromm 1966:68).

Liberation Theology, as a radical form of Christianity, can complement Marxism by providing what Thomas Dean calls a utopian, Biblical vision to guide the revolution in a direction which fulfils the humanistic requirements for a new era (Dean 1975). The eschatological tradition, applied to earthly life, can thus become an important element of the struggle for liberation. I believe that this is how the imagination provided by the Christian tradition and the revolutionary spirit of Marxism, instead of warring, have become fused in the praxis of Liberation Theology in Central America.

REFERENCES

- Altholz, Josef L.
1967 The Churches in the Nineteenth Century. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc.
- Beeson, Trevor and Jenny Pearce
1984 A Vision of Hope -- The Churches and Change in Latin America. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Berryman, Phillip
1987 Liberation Theology. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Boff, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff

1989 *Introducing Liberation Theology*. Trans. by Paul Burns.
Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books.

1984 *Salvation and Liberation*. Trans. by R.R. Barr. Maryknoll, N.Y:
Orbis Books.

Dean, Thomas

1975 *Post-Theistic Thinking*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Foroohar, Manzar

1989 *The Catholic Church and Social Change in Nicaragua*. Albany,
N.Y: State University of New York Press.

Franklin, R.W.

1987 *Nineteenth Century Churches*. New York: Garland Publishing,
Inc.

Fromm, Erich

1966 *Marx's Concept of Man*. New York: Ungar.

Gutierrez, Gustavo

1974 *Liberation, Theology, and Proclamation*. In *The Pope and
Revolution*. Q.L. Quade, editor. Washington, D.C: Ethics and
Public Policy Center.

Marx, Karl

[1867] *Capital*. Trans. by S. Moore and E. Aveling. New York:
1967 International Publishers.

[1853] *Parliamentary Debates: The Clergy and the Struggle for the Ten-
1971 Hour Day: Starvation in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels:
Articles on Britain*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, p. 154-160.

[1843] *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Trans. by A. Jolin and
1967 J. O'Malley. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Marx, Karl and F. Engels

[1849] *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Trans. by S. Moore.
1977 Moscow: Progress Publishers.

Vidler, Alec R.

1965 *The Church in an Age of Revolution*. London: Penguin Books.

Weber, Max

1904 *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.