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# Radical Christianity, Liberation Theology, and Emancipation

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## ABSTRACT

*This article situates Latin American, especially Brazilian, liberation theology within a longer radical emancipatory tradition in Christianity while underscoring its decisive ruptures. It first traces subversive motifs from Exodus, Jubilee, the Jerusalem community and medieval–early modern dissenting movements to modern anti-imperial struggles. It then analyses the historical matrix of dependent capitalism, military–authoritarian rule and Cold War geopolitics that produced a pastoral and theological crisis in Latin America, crystallised at Medellín and Puebla. The article explores liberation theology's core innovations: structural sin, salvation as historical liberation, the preferential option for the poor, and the epistemological centrality of Base Ecclesial Communities. It argues that the movement both fulfils and transforms Christian radicalism through its systematic use of Marxist and dependency analysis. Finally, it assesses the afterlives of liberation theology in social movements, global contextual theologies and contemporary Catholic discourse, proposing it as an open methodological arsenal for ongoing emancipatory praxis.*

**Keywords:** Liberation theology, Radical Christianity, Structural sin, Base Ecclesial Communities (CEBs), Preferential option for the poor

## Introduction

The perennial tension within historical Christianity between institutional consolidation and subversive currents finds one of its most potent modern expressions in the encounter between ecclesial tradition and revolutionary politics in twentieth-century Latin America. To interrogate what constitutes a "radical emancipatory tradition" within the faith is to trace a dialectical thread running from scriptural foundations to contemporary praxis, a thread defined by the insistence that fidelity to the gospel is inextricable from a material commitment to the overthrow of oppressive orders. This tradition, often submerged yet never extinguished, locates its primordial

  

ISSN: 2455-8834

Volume:10, Issue:12 "December 2025"

typology in the Exodus narrative of a deity who sides with slaves against Pharaoh, and finds early institutional form in the communitarian experiment of the Jerusalem church, holding all goods in common. It resurfaces cyclically: among certain medieval mendicants challenging feudal property relations, in the peasant radicalism of the German Reformation, and in the anti-colonial prophecies of indigenous movements. The core assertion remains constant: divine purpose is historically manifested in the liberation of the wretched of the earth (Gutiérrez, 1988).

Latin American liberation theology, particularly in its Brazilian incarnation, represents neither a simple reclamation of this buried lineage nor a clean rupture with it. Rather, it constitutes a profound transformation, synthesizing archaic Christian motifs with a modern analytic of power (Berryman, 1987). Confronted with the concrete barbarism of pervasive favelas, military-authoritarian states, and the penetrating influence of U.S.-led anti-communist counter-insurgency, a generation of theologians and pastoral actors forged a novel theological method. Figures like Gustavo Gutiérrez in Peru, or Brazil's Leonardo Boff and Archbishop Hélder Câmara, performed a decisive operation. They recovered central Christian categories, prophetic critique of power, eschatological hope as a historical force, solidarity with the marginalised, and systematically refunctioned them through a conceptual apparatus drawn from historical materialism (Boff & Boff, 1987).

This synthesis produced critical innovations. The concept of "sin" was expanded from individual vice to encompass "structural sin": the entrenched, objective violence of capitalist political economy and its attendant social formations. Correspondingly, "salvation" acquired a this-worldly, social dimension, understood as liberation from the tripartite oppression of economic exploitation, political domination, and cultural alienation (Sobrino & Burns, 2003, pp. 116–121). Most significantly, the epistemological privilege of the institutional magisterium was challenged by the "preferential option for the poor." This was not mere charitable regard but a methodological principle: the oppressed masses, organized in Base Ecclesial Communities (*Comunidades Eclesiais de Base*), became the primary subjects of history and theological knowledge, interpreting scripture through the lens of their own struggle.

Thus, the Brazilian and wider Latin American experience did more than apply a pre-existing radical tradition to new circumstances. It reconstituted that tradition's very content. By integrating Marxist social analysis as a necessary tool for diagnosing the mechanisms of oppression, and by positing the organised poor as the definitive agents of their own liberation, it pushed the Christian emancipatory impulse beyond moral protest into the realm of a concrete socio-historical project (Wiebe et al., 2025). The result was a theology that was authentically rooted in the ancient narratives of Exodus and Gospel, yet which spoke in the urgent, materialist accents of the late twentieth century, demanding not merely compassion but revolutionary change.

  

ISSN: 2455-8834

Volume:10, Issue:12 "December 2025"

**Mapping Christianity's Radical Emancipatory Traditions**

From its inception, Christianity has contained within itself a profound and irresolvable tension, a constitutive contradiction between the imperatives of institutional power and the disruptive logic of its own foundational narratives. The historical trajectory of the faith, following its enshrinement as the state religion of Rome, can be read as a prolonged and often violent struggle between the bureaucratic apparatuses developed to administer doctrine and maintain social quietism, and those subterranean, insurgent currents that interpret its sacred texts as a direct mandate for rebellion against earthly tyranny. This internal antagonism is not a minor theme but the central dialectic through which any claim for a radical, emancipatory tradition within Christianity must be evaluated. Such a tradition represents neither a marginal heresy nor a footnote to the main narrative; it is, rather, the recurrent and explosive return of the religion's most dangerous and suppressed memories: of a deity who acts as a liberator of enslaved peoples, and of a messiah condemned and executed by the machinery of imperial authority (Metz, 1980). The hallmark of this tradition is its absolute, non-negotiable refusal to sever the promise of spiritual redemption from the necessity of political revolution, insisting that the latter constitutes the only credible terrain upon which the former can be realised.

Charting the course of this tradition demands a dialectical excavation of history, one that recognises its manifestations not as isolated episodes but as connected eruptions against a recurring backdrop of ecclesial and state consolidation. Its primal archetype is established in the Exodus narrative, a theological-political document in which the divine is presented not as a detached, omnipotent sovereign but as a committed partisan, intervening decisively in historical conflict on behalf of an oppressed population against the concentrated power of a tyrant state. This sets a paradigmatic precedent where holiness is inextricably linked to emancipation. The early Jerusalem community, as portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles, attempted to institutionalise this paradigm through a practice of communal ownership, a brief experiment in religious communism whose memory would persistently haunt the later Church's accumulation of vast wealth and its alliances with secular rulers (Miranda, 2004). This emancipatory impulse, though frequently suppressed, proved impossible to extinguish.

The Brazilian context stands as a particularly potent exemplar, condensing the broader regional crisis into its most acute form. There, a society undergoing rapid yet grotesquely uneven modernisation, characterised by vast, unproductive latifundia and the explosive, desperate growth of urban peripheries, was subjected to the violent dislocations of a dependent capitalist model. The U.S.-backed military coup of 1964 installed a national-security dictatorship explicitly committed to eradicating any threat of substantive social reform, employing torture, forced disappearance, and systematic censorship as core instruments of governance (Skidmore, 1988). Within this crucible of pervasive immiseration, political terror, and the relentless ideological

  

ISSN: 2455-8834

Volume:10, Issue:12 "December 2025"

pressure of U.S.-led anti-communism, a transformative shift began within significant sectors of the Catholic Church (Mainwaring, 1986).

This metamorphosis was gradual and born of pastoral crisis. Clergy and lay workers engaged in grassroots efforts found their traditional ministries of charity utterly inadequate in the face of structural, endemic poverty. To speak meaningfully of salvation to a landless campesino or a dweller of Rio's favelas demanded a new lexicon, one capable of diagnosing the root causes of their suffering. Praxis, in this sense, preceded and necessitated theory. The intellectual architecture was subsequently supplied by figures such as the Peruvian Gustavo Gutiérrez, whose 1971 work *A Theology of Liberation* provided the seminal framework, and the Brazilian Franciscan Leonardo Boff, who sought to systematically reconstruct Christian doctrine from the vantage point of the oppressed (Smith, 1991). The symbolic leadership of Archbishop Hélder Câmara of Recife, whose famous dictum, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist," encapsulated the movement's dual challenge to state terror and ecclesiastical conservatism, and became emblematic of this new orientation. The theoretical breakthrough of liberation theology resided in its dual operation of recuperation and transformation. It deliberately reclaimed central, yet often dormant, Christian categories, infusing them with a concrete historical materiality. The prophetic critique found in the Old Testament was revitalised not as abstract moralising, but as a precise analysis of class domination and imperialist exploitation. Eschatological hope was stripped of its otherworldly, pacifying interpretations and reconceived as a historical force, an "utopian function" that drives transformative action in the present by projecting a radically alternative future (Bloch, 1986). Solidarity was transposed from a sentiment of voluntary piety to a necessary class stance, defined as an unambiguous alignment with the oppressed in their objective material struggle.

To execute this recuperation effectively, however, liberation theology required an analytical toolkit that the classical theological tradition lacked: a rigorous method for dissecting the mechanics of societal power. It discovered this toolkit, with audacious and controversial results, in historical materialism. This engagement was not a slavish adoption of Marxist–Leninist dogma, but a strategic and critical appropriation of its analytical core,its capacity for socioeconomic diagnosis (Segundo, 1976). Thinkers of the movement approached Marxian theory as an indispensable sociological instrument, a "scientific" counterpart to complement the "prophetic" dimension of biblical faith (Dussel, 1988, pp. 7–10).

The first and most essential was a significant expansion of the theological view of sin. Liberation theology convincingly argued that sin is not just personal misconduct but is objectified and rooted in unjust social structures (Ellacuría & Sobrino, 1993). "Structural sin" refers to the ongoing violence embodied in economic systems, legal frameworks, and political institutions that systematically cause premature death and dehumanization for millions. The dependent

  

ISSN: 2455-8834

Volume:10, Issue:12 "December 2025"

capitalist mode of production in Latin America was analyzed as inherently sinful, a massive force of institutionalized theft. Likewise, the idea of salvation was widened and given tangible historical shape. It was no longer limited to the private soul or an afterlife; salvation became synonymous with liberation,a comprehensive process involving three interconnected dimensions: liberation from economic exploitation (the social-structural level), liberation from political control and personal oppression (the historical-political level), and liberation from selfishness and alienation (the spiritual level). Genuine spiritual growth, in this perspective, was impossible without active involvement in the struggle for social justice (C. Boff, 1990, pp. 41–44)

The most radical innovation, however, was epistemological in nature. The "preferential option for the poor" proclaimed by liberation theology was far more than a call to heightened charity. It constituted a methodological revolution within the theological discipline itself, proposing the poor as the privileged starting point for interpreting both Scripture and reality (Lohfink, 1987, pp. 15–16). It asserted that the oppressed,those rendered "non-persons" by history,hold an epistemological privilege: their lived experience of struggle and suffering becomes the primary locus for understanding both the nature of the world and the truth content of the Christian message (Costadoat, 2024). Theology thus ceases to be an abstract discipline confined to the academy; it is redefined as critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word. This epistemological shift found its practical, organic form in the Base Ecclesial Communities (Comunidades Eclesiais de Base or CEBs). These small, grassroots assemblies of the rural and urban poor gathered to read the Bible collectively, interpreting passages like the Exodus or the Magnificat not as ancient archetypes but as living scripts directly relevant to their own context of struggle. Within these CEBs, the poor became the active subjects of history and of theological knowledge, transforming themselves from passive objects of clerical pedagogy or philanthropic concern into the architects of their own hermeneutic; in Boff's striking formulation, they represented a "new way of being Church," reinventing the institution from below (Boff, 1986, p. 4).

This formidable intellectual and pastoral project inevitably provoked a formidable counter-reaction from consolidated powers. The Vatican magisterium, under Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), launched a sustained doctrinal offensive, charging liberation theologians with politicizing the faith and importing Marxist categories in a theologically illegitimate way (Rowland, 2022). Leonardo Boff was subjected to a silencing order, an episode that symbolized the attempt to reassert centralized doctrinal control over a burgeoning "church from below" (Cox, 1988). Concurrently, the military regimes and their affiliated death squads targeted liberationist clergy, religious, and lay activists with singular ferocity, martyring figures like Archbishop Óscar Romero and countless anonymous base-

  

ISSN: 2455-8834

Volume:10, Issue:12 "December 2025"

community leaders, and contributing to the eventual marginalization of the movement amid the collapse of socialist projects and the ascendancy of neoliberalism (Lernoux, 1986).

Yet, to pronounce its demise constitutes a shallow historical judgment. The legacy of liberation theology is profound, diffuse, and enduring. It irrevocably altered the landscape of Latin American Christianity, implanting a commitment to social justice deep within the pastoral consciousness of significant Church sectors. Its methodological core, the preferential option for the poor and the critique of idolatrous power structures, has been globalised, influencing contextual theologies in Africa, Asia, and among dispossessed minorities in the global North (Comblin, 1998). Politically, its emphasis on popular organisation, conscientization, and ethical resistance provided a vital cultural and spiritual foundation for subsequent social movements, from Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST) to indigenous rights campaigns across the Andes (Ondetti,2008). In final analysis, Latin American liberation theology represents the most coherent and consequential historical attempt to resolve Christianity's foundational tension in a revolutionary direction. It achieved more than a simple application of an older radical tradition to contemporary circumstances. It fundamentally reconstituted that tradition by forging an unprecedented synthesis between the prophetic strands of biblical religion and the analytical power of historical materialism. In doing so, it pushed the Christian emancipatory impulse beyond the confines of moralistic protest or millenarian fantasy, transforming it into a project for historical liberation equipped with a concrete social subject, a rigorous diagnostic of power, and a praxis rooted in the daily struggles of the oppressed. Its historical trajectory underscores the immense difficulty of sustaining such a project against the combined assaults of imperial reaction and institutional restoration. Nevertheless, its explosive emergence in the latter half of the twentieth century stands as a powerful testament to the enduring, and ever-potent, capacity of the gospel to be read anew, in epochs of extreme crisis, as nothing less than a manual for insurrection.

**Liberation Theology: Emergence, Basis, and Context**

The historical matrix from which Latin American liberation theology erupted in the latter half of the twentieth century was defined by a triad of converging forces: a political economy of extreme and dependent capitalism, a wave of reactionary military-authoritarian states, and the overarching geopolitical struggle of the Cold War. To grasp the specificity of its emergence, one must first apprehend the concrete social landscape that rendered its discourse not merely plausible but urgently necessary. Following the Second World War, the Latin American subcontinent, long integrated into the global system as a producer of primary commodities, experienced a phase of industrial expansion. Yet this modernisation was profoundly asymmetrical, consolidating wealth in the hands of a narrow oligarchy of landowners and a nascent industrial bourgeoisie, while generating massive urban peripheries, the favelas, villas

  

ISSN: 2455-8834

Volume:10, Issue:12 "December 2025"

miserias, callampas, where rural migrants and a growing proletariat existed in conditions of infrastructural abandonment and chronic underemployment (Cardoso, 1972, pp. 83–86). In the countryside, latifundia of staggering size coexisted with minifundia plots incapable of sustaining a family, a structure maintained by often-violent clientelist networks that reproduced "internal colonies" within formally independent nation-states (Cardoso, 1972, pp. 88–90).

This stark social contradiction was managed, and ultimately enforced, by a political shift of decisive import. From the 1960s through the 1980s, a succession of military coups, Brazil (1964), Argentina (1966 and 1976), Uruguay (1973), Chile (1973), installed regimes of a new type. These were not the traditional caudillo dictatorships but bureaucratic-authoritarian states, technocratic in aspiration and explicitly dedicated to the twin goals of eliminating any popular or socialist threat and restructuring economies to favor international capital and domestic finance (O'Donnell, 1973). Their methods were those of the national security doctrine, a counter-insurgency ideology imported and refined with crucial assistance from Washington, which framed all opposition as a subversive existential war; U.S. policy-makers saw these regimes as pivotal anti-communist allies and actively supported them diplomatically, financially, and through security cooperation (Spektor, 2018). The result was a continent-wide apparatus of state terror: systematic torture, forced disappearances, clandestine detention centers, and censorship. This political landscape was itself inscribed within the larger conflict of the Cold War, where U.S. policy, under the aegis of the Monroe Doctrine and the Johnson, Nixon, and Reagan administrations, actively supported these regimes as bulwarks against communist influence, often directly training their security forces and conditioning economic aid on anti-leftist orthodoxy (Spektor, 2018).

It was within this furnace of structural poverty and political repression that a profound transformation within the Latin American Catholic Church began to unfold. The Church's historical position had been deeply ambiguous: the heir to a colonial *patronato* that tied it to Iberian crowns, a great landowner in its own right, and frequently a pillar of the conservative order (Dussel, 1981). Yet internal currents of renewal, prompted by the social encyclicals of Popes Leo XIII and Pius XI, and more decisively by the epochal convocation of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) under Pope John XXIII, created an opening. Vatican II's emphasis on the Church as the "People of God," its affirmation of religious liberty, and its call for engagement with the "joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties" of the modern world provided a powerful impetus for *aggiornamento* (O'Malley, 2010). This was immediately followed by Pope Paul VI's 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, which denounced the "international imperialism of money" and declared that "the new name for peace is development." For activists and pastoral workers confronting daily misery, these documents were not abstract theology but a mandate.

  

ISSN: 2455-8834

Volume:10, Issue:12 "December 2025"

The transformation proceeded from the ground upward. In urban slums and impoverished rural parishes, priests, nuns, and lay catechists found that traditional sacramental ministry and charity were catastrophically inadequate. The scale of suffering demanded a different response, one that moved from alleviating symptoms to confronting causes. This pastoral crisis generated a new praxis, which in turn demanded a new theory. Proto-forms of organization emerged, most significantly the Base Ecclesial Communities (Comunidades Eclesiales de Base, or CEBs) (Azevedo, 1987, pp. 1–4). These were small, grassroots groups of the poor who gathered for Bible study, prayer, and discussion of their immediate problems,lack of clean water, land tenure, wages (Bruneau, 1982, pp. 210–213). In Brazil, the formation of the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (Pastoral Land Commission) in 1975 provided a crucial arm for supporting peasants and indigenous groups in conflicts with landowners and the state (Hoddy, 2021, pp. 343–345; Adriance, 1995).

The symbolic figure who came to embody this shift was the Brazilian Archbishop Hélder Câmara of Olinda and Recife. A former auxiliary bishop of Rio de Janeiro who had moved sharply leftward after witnessing the 1964 coup, Câmara's famous aphorism,"When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist",perfectly captured the political stakes of moving from charity to justice. His advocacy for non-violent resistance and his international denunciations of torture made him a global icon and a target for the regime's violence (his assistant, Father Antônio Henrique Pereira Neto, was murdered in 1969). Alongside him, figures like the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Salvadoran Archbishop Óscar Romero,the latter transformed from a theological conservative into a fearless critic of his nation's oligarchy and military, before his assassination in 1980,epitomized a church willing to risk martyrdom by taking sides (French, 2007, pp. 409–412; Brockman, 1989, pp. 210–212).

The intellectual crystallization of this vast pastoral and social ferment occurred at the landmark conference of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. Building explicitly on Vatican II, the Medellín documents offered a startlingly radical analysis. They spoke of the continent living under a "situation of sin" and "institutionalized violence," condemned the "international imperialism of money," and called for a "preferential option for the poor." This last phrase, which would become the mantra of the movement, was not a suggestion of benevolent paternalism but a methodological and epistemological imperative. It meant the Church must structurally align itself with the oppressed, seeing reality from their perspective and supporting their struggles for liberation. This option was reaffirmed at the subsequent CELAM conference in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979, though by then a conservative counter-offensive within the Church was already gathering force (Della Cava, 1988; Cousineau, 2022).

  

ISSN: 2455-8834

Volume:10, Issue:12 "December 2025"

Theological production exploded in the wake of Medellín. Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation* (1971) provided the foundational systematic framework. His work, and that of others like the Uruguayan Juan Luis Segundo, the Argentinian Enrique Dussel, and the Brazilian Leonardo Boff, performed a decisive double operation. First, it engaged in a recovery of central biblical themes, re-reading them through the lens of contemporary oppression. The Exodus was not merely a spiritual allegory but the paradigmatic narrative of God's action in history as liberator of an enslaved people. The prophetic books were manuals of critique against corrupt power and economic injustice. Jesus' proclamation in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:18–19), announcing good news to the poor and release to the captives, was declared the manifesto of his mission, directly applicable to contemporary Latin America. Eschatology, the study of the "last things", was transformed from a doctrine about the end of the world into a "utopian principle" that energised struggle for a more just society in history (Segundo, 1976; Dussel, 1976).

Second, and more controversially, liberation theology deliberately incorporated the analytical tools of modern social science to diagnose the mechanisms of that oppression. It engaged in a sustained and critical dialogue with Marxism and Dependency Theory. This was not an adoption of Marxist metaphysics or atheism. As Gutiérrez insisted, it was a matter of utilising Marxism's "scientific" or analytical instruments, particularly its concepts of class struggle, surplus value, exploitation, and ideology, as a necessary "mediating" tool to understand the concrete social reality that theology must address. Similarly, Dependency Theory, as developed by economists like Raúl Prebisch and Andre Gunder Frank, provided a crucial framework. It argued that Latin American underdevelopment was not a primordial condition but the direct, structural result of its historical integration into the world capitalist system as a subordinate producer of raw materials and an importer of finished goods, a relationship that perpetuated poverty and drained wealth to the metropolitan centres (Dussel, 1976).

From this synthesis arose liberation theology's most transformative conceptual innovations. The notion of sin was radically socialised. Beyond personal transgression, sin existed objectively in "structures of sin", the legal, economic, and political institutions that perpetuated injustice and dehumanisation. Capitalism itself, in its dependent peripheral form, could be analysed as a structurally sinful system. Conversely, salvation was reconceived not as a purely otherworldly affair but as liberation, a holistic process with three inextricable dimensions: liberation from social and economic exploitation (the political dimension), liberation from personal and historical fatalism (the psychological and pedagogical dimension), and liberation from selfishness and alienation from God (the theological dimension). The ultimate goal was orthopraxis, right action, as the criterion for authentic orthodoxy, right belief. Theology itself was redefined as "critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word" (Segundo, 1976).

  

ISSN: 2455-8834

Volume:10, Issue:12 "December 2025"

The Base Ecclesial Communities were the indispensable social base and practical laboratory for this theology. They operationalised the "see-judge-act" method: observing their concrete situation (*ver*), analysing it in light of biblical reflection and social theory (*juzgar*), and then undertaking collective action (*actuar*). This action could range from building a community well or school, to organising a land occupation, to participating in protests against the dictatorship (Azevedo, 1987; Meszaros, 2000, pp. 517–520). In these CEBs, the "epistemological privilege of the poor" became a lived reality. The poor were no longer objects of evangelisation but subjects of their own history and interpreters of their own faith. This represented a profound decentralisation of ecclesiastical authority, a fact not lost on Rome or the local hierarchies (Bruneau, 1982).

By the late 1970s, the movement faced a formidable dual reaction. From within the Church, a powerful conservative resurgence, led by Pope John Paul II and his doctrinal enforcer Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, moved to contain it. The Vatican's 1984 *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation* and the 1986 *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* acknowledged the desire for justice but issued stern warnings against the "uncritical" adoption of Marxist concepts, the risk of reducing faith to politics, and the fomenting of class struggle. Leonardo Boff was subjected to a Vatican silencing order in 1985. The ecclesiastical hierarchy was systematically reshaped with more conservative appointments (Cousineau, 2022). Externally, the military regimes targeted the "popular church" with singular ferocity. Priests, nuns, and lay leaders were arrested, tortured, and killed. The murder of Oscar Romero at the altar was the most iconic, but hundreds of catechists and community organisers met similar fates (French, 2007). By the 1990s, with the dictatorships receding, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the global triumph of neoliberal ideology, liberation theology was widely declared passé, a relic of a bygone ideological age.

Such a verdict, however, is profoundly ahistorical. The legacy of liberation theology is sedimented deep within Latin American society and the global Church. Its core methodological insight, the preferential option for the poor as a starting point for social and theological analysis, has been irrevocably planted. It provided the essential moral and organisational infrastructure for the rise of new social movements, from Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (MST) to indigenous mobilisations across the Andes (Branford & Rocha, 2002; Carter, 2010, pp. 186–190; Meszaros, 2000, pp. 517–520). Its influence diffused into other disciplines of liberation, black theology, feminist theology, and queer theology. Even its most potent critic, Pope Francis, an Argentine, embodies a paradoxical confirmation: his papacy's focus on the "peripheries," his denunciations of an "economy that kills," and his critiques of clericalism are unthinkable without the continental upheaval that liberation theology both theorised and catalysed (Cousineau, 2022).

  

ISSN: 2455-8834

Volume:10, Issue:12 "December 2025"

In final analysis, Latin American liberation theology was not a theological fad but a historically significant attempt to resolve, in a revolutionary direction, the ancient Christian tension between spiritual promise and material condition. It represented the most sophisticated effort to synthesize transcendental hope with immanent critique, leveraging the analytical power of historical materialism to explicate the mechanisms of oppression that the biblical prophets could only denounce in moral terms. Its apparent eclipse speaks less to the failure of its propositions than to the immense, coordinated power of the forces arrayed against it: the dual hegemonies of a restored Roman magisterium and a triumphant global capitalism. That it emerged at all, and that its echoes continue to reverberate, stands as a testament to the explosive, and permanently unsettling, potential within the Christian tradition when its narratives are reclaimed not as a solace for the oppressed, but as a weapon (Cousineau, 2022).

**Continuities: Liberation Theology as Fulfilment of Radical Motifs**

The contention that Latin American liberation theology constituted a radical innovation untethered from historical Christian tradition is a superficial reading, one often promoted by its detractors to isolate it as a Marxist aberration. A more dialectical examination reveals that its profound originality lay not in invention, but in a rigorous and systematic explicitation. It performed a decisive hermeneutical operation on the corpus of Christian scripture and history, bringing to the foreground the latent political and economic radicalism that had been consistently marginalised, spiritualized, or suppressed by institutional orthodoxy. Its power derived from its claim to orthodoxy, not as submission to magisterial decree, but as a recovery of the tradition's own submerged core (Gutiérrez, 1983, pp. 8–11). In this sense, it was less a rupture than a resurrection, drawing into the harsh light of contemporary class struggle a series of ancient motifs that had long served as a dormant, unsettling memory within the faith (Rieger, 1998).

The primary site of this recovery was the biblical text itself, subjected to a hermeneutic forged in the crucible of popular struggle. The Exodus narrative, for centuries rendered as an allegory of personal salvation from sin, was restored to its literal, material meaning: a divine intervention in socio-political history to liberate an enslaved people from a tyrannical state apparatus (Tamez, 1982, pp. 15–20). For base communities in the Brazilian sertão or the Peruvian Andes, Pharaoh was not an abstract spiritual metaphor but a tangible reality, the local landowner, the military officer, the structural adjustment program imposed by Washington. This reading was not eisegesis, but a return to the text's plain historical sense, reactivated by a historical context mirroring its original conditions of oppression. Similarly, the Levitical Jubilee (Leviticus 25), with its mandated manumission of slaves, forgiveness of debts, and restitution of ancestral lands, was transposed from a neglected ritual law into a potent theological mandate for agrarian reform and debt cancellation. Liberation theologians meticulously linked this to Jesus' inaugural sermon in Luke 4, where he quotes the Isaianic promise of "liberty to the captives" and declares it

  

ISSN: 2455-8834

Volume:10, Issue:12 "December 2025"

"fulfilled today." This exegesis collapsed sacred history into contemporary praxis, arguing that the Jubilary mission was not annulled but inaugurated in Christ, demanding concrete, institutional realisation (Brueggemann, 1978).

This hermeneutical shift extended to the normative model of the early Church. The description in the Acts of the Apostles of the Jerusalem community holding "all things in common" and distributing goods "to each as any had need" was resurrected from its status as a pious but impractical ideal. It became, instead, a prototype for the Base Ecclesial Community and a theological critique of capitalist property relations. The communal sharing of the *koinonia* was seen not as a temporary aberration but as an essential expression of an ecclesiology opposed to the accumulation of wealth (Theissen, 1978). Furthermore, the cult of the martyrs received a stark political updating. The witness of Archbishop Óscar Romero, gunned down at the altar, or the murdered catechists of the *comunidades de base*, was deliberately framed within the lineage of the early Christian martyrs who defied Roman imperial power. Their blood was interpreted not as a seal of otherworldly piety, but as the ultimate testimony to the cost of solidarity with the oppressed in the face of modern, state-sanctioned terror (Sobrino, 1994, pp. 52–55). This provided a powerful hagiography for the movement, rooting its suffering in the most venerable soil of Christian tradition.

The inevitable consequence of this recovery was a renewed and intensified conflict with temporal and ecclesiastical authority, a conflict that itself displayed a stark historical continuity. Just as the prophets faced the royal court and the early Christians faced the Roman magistrates, liberationist clergy faced the dual hegemony of the national security state and the conservative episcopacy. The pattern was cyclical: the call for justice, rooted in a return to foundational texts, was met with accusations of subversion and heresy. Figures like Friar Bartolomé de las Casas in the 16th century, who used Gospel principles to indict the *encomienda* system, prefigured the ostracism faced by a Leonardo Boff or the murder of a Romero (Gutiérrez, 1993). The institutional Church, often wedded to existing power structures, has perennially sought to domesticate the dangerous memory of its own origins. Liberation theology's crime was to refuse this domestication, making the implications of the Gospel so explicit that they became an incendiary critique of both state and Church complicity.

The most significant doctrinal explicitation was in the realms of eschatology and ethics. Liberation theology dismantled the convenient theological separation between a spiritualized "Kingdom of God" in the hereafter and a neutral political order in the here and now. It argued, following theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez, that eschatological hope is not a distraction from history but a critical force within it, a "utopian principle" that denies absolute validity to any unjust present and energises the struggle for a more fraternal society (Moltmann, 1967). This hope was concretised in the ethical imperative of the "preferential option for the poor." While

  

ISSN: 2455-8834

Volume:10, Issue:12 "December 2025"

charity had always been a Christian virtue, the "option" was something categorically different: a strategic, epistemological, and political alignment. It declared that God's own partiality, revealed in the Exodus and the Magnificat, demands a corresponding partiality from the believer and the Church as an institution. To know God is to do justice (Jeremiah 22:16); this latent biblical equation was made the central axis of theological epistemology (Gutiérrez, 1983, pp. 25–27).

The ultimate testament to the power of this explication is that it forced a reaction, and even a partial absorption, at the very centre of ecclesiastical power. The Vatican's attempted suppression under John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger was a testament to the perceived threat. Yet, tellingly, the core terminology and concepts proved ineradicable. John Paul II himself, in his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, formally enshrined the "preferential love for the poor" as a legitimate part of Catholic social teaching, acknowledging it as a form of primacy in charity to which "the whole tradition of the Church bears witness" (Moltmann, 1967). This was a moment of profound dialectical absorption: a concept born of radical praxis and Marxist mediation was sanitised and integrated, yet its critical potential remained. The struggle was no longer over the phrase itself, but over its interpretation, whether it signified charitable concern or structural transformation (Rieger, 1998).

In conclusion, liberation theology's historical role was that of a clarifier. It subjected the ambiguous, polyvalent tradition of Christianity to the relentless pressure of a specific historical nightmare, the misery and tyranny of late twentieth-century Latin America. In that crucible, it distilled from the tradition a potent and coherent political elixir. It did not invent the themes of liberation, Jubilee, communal sharing, martyrdom, or hope. Instead, it stripped away the layers of mystification and pacification that had accumulated over centuries, demonstrating that what was often dismissed as a "political reading" was, in fact, a return to the text's most authentic and dangerous historical meaning (Tamez, 1982, pp. 21–23). Its genius was to demonstrate that the most revolutionary elements were not imported novelties, but the recovered inheritance of Christianity itself, now deployed as a weapon in the contemporary struggle for liberation (Brueggemann, 1978).

**Ruptures: New Elements in the Emancipatory Project**

To assert that liberation theology merely resurrected dormant Christian traditions is to grasp only one dimension of its historical significance. Its equally decisive contribution was the introduction of sharp, systematic ruptures with established Catholic thought and practice, forged in the crucible of Latin America's mid-century crises. These innovations were not incremental adjustments but conceptual leaps that reconfigured the relationship between faith and politics, producing a theology whose radicalism lay precisely in its synthesis of recovered memory and

  

ISSN: 2455-8834

Volume:10, Issue:12 "December 2025"

imported analysis (Sung, 2024). The movement's enduring shock value can be traced to four fundamental departures from the prevailing ecclesiastical consensus.

Foremost among these was its unapologetic and methodical engagement with Marxist social theory. While the Church's social teaching, from *Rerum Novarum* onward, had condemned the excesses of liberalism and affirmed workers' rights, its critique remained circumscribed by a Thomistic natural law framework. It denounced specific injustices, usury, exploitation, degraded working conditions, without providing a structural analysis of the capitalist mode of production as a totality. Liberation theology shattered this limitation. Thinkers like Gustavo Gutiérrez and Hugo Assmann argued that to understand the mechanisms of poverty, one required tools beyond philosophy; one required a science of society. They turned to historical materialism not as a metaphysics to replace faith, but as an indispensable "analytical mediation," capable of naming dependency, class domination, and imperialist violence in concrete, historical terms (Assmann, 1975; Castrillón Restrepo, 2018, pp. 20–22). This permitted a diagnosis of Latin American reality in terms of class struggle, surplus value extraction, dependency, and imperialist domination, and made it possible to speak of salvation as a socio-historical liberation from oppressive structures rather than merely a private, post-mortem destiny.

This theoretical shift engendered a second, equally profound innovation: the redefinition of the poor from objects of compassion to subjects of history. For centuries, Catholic charity, however sincere, operated within a paradigm of paternalism. The poor were the passive recipients of alms, their suffering an occasion for the sanctification of the giver. Liberation theology inverted this relationship epistemologically and politically. The "preferential option for the poor" was, in practice, an option for the poor as a collective political actor. The oppressed were not a problem to be managed but the necessary agents of their own liberation, the privileged locus of God's historical activity (Kirwan, 2012, p. 250). This transformed the Church's role from that of a dispenser of aid to that of an accompaniment to popular movements, peasant leagues, labour unions, and neighbourhood associations. The Base Ecclesial Communities became the incubators of this new subjectivity, where campesinos and shantytown dwellers analysed scripture in light of their own struggles, thereby becoming theologians in their own right. This was a direct challenge to the clerical monopoly on doctrinal interpretation and a radical democratisation of ecclesial life. The poor were no longer defined by what they lacked, but by their potential power to transform a society that excluded them.

Third, liberation theology cultivated a novel and inherently tense institutional positioning. It emerged within the body of the Church during the zenith of Cold War anti-communism, a period when any critique of capitalism risked being conflated with Soviet allegiance. This placed the movement in a perpetual state of dual confrontation: against the repressive apparatuses of the military states, which targeted it as subversive, and against the defensive hierarchies of the

  

ISSN: 2455-8834

Volume:10, Issue:12 "December 2025"

Vatican, which feared the contamination of doctrine. The resulting dynamic was uniquely modern. Earlier radical currents, such as the Franciscan Spirituals or the Taborites, were straightforwardly condemned and suppressed. Liberation theology, however, provoked a more complex and ambivalent reaction from Rome, in which concepts and language associated with the "option for the poor" were simultaneously constrained and, in part, absorbed into official social teaching (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). Theologians like Leonardo Boff were silenced, yet the movement's core pastoral expressions, the CEBs, could not be wholly eradicated. This produced a fraught, liminal existence: officially suspect yet deeply embedded in the life of the popular Church, generating an internal anticlericalism directed at a reactionary hierarchy while still claiming Catholic identity.

Finally, the movement executed a definitive pivot from an ethics of individual morality to a praxis of structural transformation. Traditional Catholic ethics, focused on personal sin and virtue, addressed social ills primarily through calls to charity and appeals to the conscience of the powerful. Liberation theology identified this as profoundly insufficient, arguing that charitable palliatives left the underlying engines of accumulation and exclusion intact. Its key contribution was the concept of "structural sin", the idea that injustice is codified and perpetuated by economic systems, legal frameworks, and political institutions themselves (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). Consequently, authentic Christian action demanded not merely soup kitchens, but campaigns for land reform, debt cancellation, workers' control, and the overthrow of dictatorships. This reorientation from the individual to the system marked a quantum leap in Christian social thought. Its influence is paradoxically confirmed by its partial, sanitised absorption into later magisterial documents, which speak of "structures of sin" while carefully draining the term of its revolutionary class content (Castrillón Restrepo, 2018, pp. 22–23).

The ultimate testament to the generative power of these ruptures is the proliferation of theologies they inspired, which critiqued the original liberationist paradigm for its own blind spots. Feminist, Black, Dalit, Indigenous, and queer theologies of liberation emerged, applying the same hermeneutic of suspicion and the same methodological commitment to the standpoint of the oppressed, but to axes of domination, gender, race, caste, coloniality, sexuality, that the primarily class-focused Latin American analysis had often marginalised. Black theology, for example, reinterpreted the Christian message from the vantage point of African American struggles against white supremacy, insisting that any authentic theology must be unreservedly identified with the liberation of the oppressed (Cone, 2010). Dalit theology, in turn, deployed similar liberationist tools to indict caste oppression and the complicity of Indian churches, insisting on reading the Bible from the perspective of "untouchable" communities and their struggles for dignity and rights (Rajkumar, 2010, pp. 3–5). This centrifugal expansion is not a repudiation of the initial project, but its logical culmination. It demonstrates that the core

  

ISSN: 2455-8834

Volume:10, Issue:12 "December 2025"

innovations of liberation theology, the use of critical social theory, the centring of subjugated historical subjects, and the critique of oppressive structures, created a template that proved translatable to other terrains of struggle. The movement's legacy, therefore, is not a closed doctrinal system but an open methodological arsenal, one that permanently altered the possibilities for how faith can engage with the project of human emancipation (Sung, 2024).

**Conclusion: Rethinking Emancipation Through Radical Christianity**

Any final assessment of Latin American liberation theology must grasp it as a dialectical unity of culmination and transcendence within the Christian tradition. It stands as the most systematic culmination of that faith's perennial insurgent undercurrent, achieving a doctrinal coherence and historical agency that earlier, more episodic movements, from the Taborites to the peasant radicals of the Reformation, could not sustain. Its genius was the recuperation and weaponisation of archaic motifs: the Exodus as a manual of political insurrection, the Jubilee as a blueprint for land reform, the martyr's witness as a contemporary charge against state terror. In this, it proved that the resources for a radical critique of power were embedded within the tradition itself, awaiting activation by a historical subject operating under conditions of extreme duress.

Yet, to view it merely as a recovery is to miss its transformative rupture. Its transcendence lay in the explicit, methodological fusion of this recovered memory with the analytical framework of historical materialism. This synthesis produced a qualitative shift: a theological discourse that could name capitalism as a structurally sinful system, identify the proletarianised poor as the collective agents of a new historical praxis, and redefine salvation itself as liberation from class domination. It moved beyond moral appeal to posit a concrete socio-political project, arguing with Gustavo Gutiérrez that authentic brotherhood required not charity but socialism, understood as the expropriation of the expropriators and the creation of a solidarity-based economy.

The contemporary resonance of this synthesis is evident in an age defined by neoliberal austerity and resurgent authoritarianism. The movement's core diagnostic, that an economic order which enriches a minority by immiserating a majority is fundamentally antagonistic to the Gospel, retains its force. While the specific geopolitical coordinates of the Cold War have faded, the structural contradictions it identified have intensified globally. The rise of a pontiff from the periphery, Pope Francis, who denounces an "economy that kills" and a "globalisation of indifference," represents a paradoxical vindication: the language of liberation, sanitised of its revolutionary edge, has permeated the very centre of ecclesiastical power, even as its original revolutionary impulse remains contained.

Future historical inquiry might fruitfully trace the diffusion of this paradigm into other confessional and technological realms. Comparative analysis with Islamic social justice

  

ISSN: 2455-8834

Volume:10, Issue:12 "December 2025"

movements or Engaged Buddhism could reveal how different traditions metabolise the critique of capital. Similarly, the emergence of digital "base communities" in the shadow of algorithmic control poses the question of whether new forms of solidarity and hermeneutical privilege can be forged in the virtual public square. The enduring lesson, as articulated by the martyred Ignacio Ellacuría, is that truth is found in the praxis of liberation. Liberation theology, therefore, endures not as a closed chapter of twentieth-century history, but as an open methodological challenge: a demonstration that faith, when pushed to its logical conclusions under conditions of material oppression, ceases to be a consolation and becomes, instead, a partisan science of emancipation.

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