INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

Bell & Howell Information and Learning
300 North Zeib Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA

UMI
800-521-0600
Speaking of Liberation:
The Emancipatory Limits of Gustavo Gutiérrez's Liberation Theology for Latin American Women

By

Helen-May Eaton Ramírez

A Thesis Submitted in Conformity with the Requirements For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Centre for the Study of Religion, in the University of Toronto

© Copyright By Helen-May Eaton Ramírez 1998
The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

L’auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author’s permission.

L’auteur conserve la propriété du droit d’auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-41423-X
Speaking of Liberation: The Emancipatory Limits of Gustavo Gutiérrez's Liberation Theology for Latin American Women

Doctor of Philosophy 1998
Helen-May Eaton Ramírez
Centre for the Study of Religion
University of Toronto

Abstract

This dissertation examines the shifting meaning of liberation in the work of the Latin American liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez. In particular, the analysis rests on women's marginality in Gutiérrez's work and liberation theology's practice in Christian Base Communities (CEBS). In order to define the gaps in Gutiérrez's thinking and the practice of liberation theology in CEBS, the work of Latin American and Latina feminist theologians is introduced as a way of determining where the limitations of Gutiérrez's own work are in terms of effective liberating impulses for women.
Acknowledgements

It is always difficult to know when such a project as this is completed whether or not the end product accurately reflects the effort, the thinking and the years of working and living on the edge of both financial stress and intellectual discovery. In part, I was sustained in this endeavour by my commitment to an idea that persistently challenged my thinking drawing me further into its complexities reminding me at every turn of my responsibility to those whose lives became the source of my studies.

No project of this magnitude is ever completed in isolation. Many have sustained me both intellectually and more personally -- all have taught me much about the expansiveness of friendship. So to my wonderful friends and family all of whom I love with profound intensity I thank you. The nature of writing a dissertation compells one to live a life of isolation as my colleagues and companeras Stephanie Walker and Darlene Juschka know only too well. Through them I have learned the not only the importance of critically examining the world in which we live but the essence of human generosity. To Marsha Hewitt, my supervisor and in the end my most poignant critic I thank for being the critical thinker and defender she is. She, better than most, understood the risks of this work. To Roger Hutchinson for offering kind and compassionate advice and to Ellen Leonard for her meticulous editorial contributions.

Finally to my family I owe my greatest gratitude. My children Daniel and Nicholas have carried the brunt of their parents' decisions. They have lived with a father geographically distant
and a mother often too absorbed in matters of little significance to their lives. The cost has been great and yet I am immensely proud of the people they are becoming. My husband/partner, Jacobo who has believed in the value of this process from the beginning and has rejoiced in each and every achievement whether large or small.

This work is dedicated to my parents. Hope Fayette Naas Eaton and Richard Dennis Eaton more than anyone have given me the gift of their love in ways that I am find myself bereft to express and to whom I will never be able to articulate adequately the depth of my own love and gratitude.
Table of Contents

Abstract: ii

Acknowledgements iii

Introduction: 1

Chapter One: 12
   The Foundation

Chapter Two: 53
   Liberation:
      Shifting Ideas in the Work of Gustavo Gutiérrez

Chapter Three: 120
   Searching For Emancipative Space

Chapter Four: 185
   The Alternative:
      Latin American and Latina Feminist Theologies

Conclusion: 264

Bibliography: 284
Introduction

When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.¹

This dissertation intends to examine the implications of changes taking place in the work of the Latin American liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, and the consequences of these changes on the lives of Catholic women. Beyond these parameters, this work is also very much about those whose voices and knowledges have been absent in Gutiérrez's major publications. The uniqueness of this project stems from what Latin American and latinas have to say not strictly about their own liberation but about their exclusion from liberatory analysis and practice. From the work of Latin American women, latinas, and those whose studies in the region have produced important insights on how liberation theology operates or other issues of concern in liberatory practice, the areas in which Gutiérrez's theology has not met its own objectives are critically expostulated. These more marginalized theorists (to Gutiérrez's prominent presence) are drawn into the analysis to act as a contrast against the representing voice of Gutiérrez as the prime emissary of liberation theology -- illustrating where his work has evaded accounting for its own complicity in subordinating others, or in closing down its own potential as an emancipatory

impulse. Consequently, this thesis is essentially an examination of some of the major disjunctures that serve to arrest emancipatory processes.

For the purposes of initiating an example of liberation theology's past value, in certainly a unique historical context, I am reminded of the lives of two Salvadoran men forced into prominence who, by both their authority and their commitment to justice, demonstrated the emancipatory if not also prophetic potential of this theology. In 1977, Rutilio Grande, a liberatory priest working in El Salvador with the poor on cooperatives and in bible study groups known as Christian Base Communities (CEBS), was shot dead along with another man and a child in a paramilitary operative backed by both army and government. This act of terror moved the newly appointed and apparently conservative leaning archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero, to turn his attention to the gross brutalities of the world in which he lived. As he did so, his commitment to liberation theology and its principles of social mobilization and transformation in all areas of social organization including that of the Church grew, as he took to imploring Salvadorans in his weekly homilies and radio addresses to join forces against the repressive tactics of the government and the army. He exercised his authority as archbishop to speak for those whose voices were either silenced by the government or absent in the media of the international community to analyze the oppressive features and events occurring daily in El Salvador, hence his labelling as the "voice of the voiceless." He encouraged not only active resistance but critical

---

2 I would suggest that Gutiérrez's status as liberation theology's principal emissary is warranted for the major contributions he has certainly made, but is also a product from the reception of his work by primarily North American publishing houses and audiences.

3 Numerous books have been written on Romero. These include *Archbishop Romero: Memories and Reflections* by Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990) and *Romero: A Life* by James R. Brockman (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989).
active resistance; one that would examine the conditions of structural violence and contestation from multiple positions. The examples provided by Rutilio Grande and Oscar Romero are what liberation theology sought to exemplify in those years. Both these men lived and died in their commitment to ensuring that those denigrated by social and political systems were not left without the support they, as priests with resources, could offer in order to realize some form of social, economic and political justice. Countless others whose profiles in the media were less prominent also lived, and died in these times fighting for justice through CEBS. While this sort of forced polarization when negotiation is no longer viable with repressive regimes is hardly desirable, the example provided by Grande and Romero of how liberation theology could move from exposition in academic books to being adopted as a generating force for contestation is striking. Liberation theology was at its height during periods that called on or were predicated on heroic acts of courage and commitment to establishing consistency between one's principles and actions. With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to discern where liberation theology began to stray from its original course of attending critically to all forms of oppression whether it be among women or, people of colour in the use of authority but those early years regardless of their own internal problems did offer a possibility. In some ways it was a potential for theology to assume a dynamically new identity independent of the type of authoritarian ties found in the collusion of state and church that had historically dominated the landscape of Latin America.\(^4\) In this vein of immense empathy for a theology and a movement that intended to enable oppressed peoples to be incorporated into a process deemed key to their emancipation, this thesis is written. In the

chapters that follow I examine the direction Gustavo Gutiérrez as liberation theology's most prominent figure internationally has taken this theology since the early 1980s that appears to put in peril important principles that permitted liberation theology to address fundamental questions concerning the role of religion in the oppression and emancipation of peoples.

The questions I raise are why this theology failed to enable women's emancipation, in particular from within an institution that women in general have supported in greater numbers than men. And the reasons why in fact liberation theology arrested such possibilities by first, not attending to those principles of critical disclosure of all forms of oppression including those that specifically hinder women; and secondly, by allowing those principles that rest on the examination of the social sciences and liberty from the Church's hierarchy to lose their significance in the methodology.5

The aims and methods liberation theologians established for this theology continue to hold relevance in the disclosure of injustice in a climate of glaring disparity. The compelling motive for this thesis rests in examining the commitment of theologians to oppose all forms of structural injustice against mounting evidence that in recent years suggests that theologians like Gutiérrez have compromised their commitment to liberation by assigning it a new guise. The fatal disjuncture in liberation theology's value has been in its reduced commitment to a social and economic liberation. Instead, the current visage of liberation is tied to a spiritually orthodox

5 Throughout this work I approach the Roman Catholic Church as a social construct. I understand that there are alternative definitions of church, however my intent is strictly one of looking at it as an institution influenced and influencing the social contexts in which it participates. I will refer to the Vatican, to the hierarchy, to the clergy and the laity as all elements of this church with differing roles and access. The context in which "Church" is used is meant to clarify to which of these categories I am referring.
identity with vulnerable historical girdings. Gutiérrez's refashioning of liberation's definition has left it only vulnerably linked to social demands. In doing so, the liberatory function of this theology to act in the world has found itself severed from theological legitimation.⁶

In its early years, the intent of liberation theology was far loftier than simply providing communities with infrastructural support; it sought to empower people to rid society of the causes of such oppressions founded in a theology that opined God's own distress and desire for a historical liberation for "the poor."⁷ The methodological approach contended that liberation theologians were to listen to the voices, interpretations and critiques that lay persons in CEBS brought to their attention, as a means through which to build on the vitality and relevance of this theology. In The Power of the Poor, Gutiérrez expresses this sentiment with this statement,

> The locus of liberation theology is elsewhere — among the poor, among the native masses, among the popular classes, as agents and creators of their own history. The place where the theology of liberation materializes is in the expressions of their faith, in their hope in the poor Christ, and in their struggles for freedom.⁸

The choice of Gustavo Gutiérrez as the pivot on which to ground the critical analysis of this thesis originates in his prominent profile through publishing and teaching connections with North American and European audiences. His international appeal as the prime spokesperson/originator of liberation theology seems to have exempted his work from sustained critical reflection by those

---

⁶ This point is developed extensively in chapter two.


who situate themselves within emancipatory discourses. My concern rests with the voices of other liberatory sectors that are not being heard clearly enough by either international advocates of liberation theology or by Gutiérrez himself. These are theorists who might enable liberation theology to advance in quarters that are more fully cognizant of the invisible but distinct ways in which oppression asserts itself in the lives of women and people of colour. The current configuration of liberation theology under Gutiérrez's direction is in dire need of a self-reflexive critique to understand how key omissions in theory and practice lead this theology into a complicity with the status quo that sustains oppression by excluding essential contributions of others. He has yet to account for how specific oppressions, like that of sexism does harm to the entirety of society and not simply to those for whom that particular oppression is designed.

The method in this dissertation is decidedly a critical one aspiring to mark the flaws in liberation theology from its onset and the more discouraging shifts Gutiérrez has taken liberation theology in recent years. The chapters act as though they are in conversation with one another balancing theory and praxis by including sections that deal not only with the critique of liberation theology under Gutiérrez's guidance (chapter two) but the problems of practising liberation theology in CEBS when the self-reflexive critique is not freely and actively incorporated into the methodology (chapter three). Throughout, lacunae where domination has been allowed to exist whether in the theology itself or in its practice in CEBS are disclosed to initiate new forums for

---

9 The exceptions would be Alistair Kee in his Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology (London: SCM Press, 1990) and Arthur F. McGovern's Liberation Theology and Its Critics (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989). Neither, however addresses the problem of gender and race in Gutiérrez's work, nor do they draw into their discussions the assessments of feminist theologians in any sustained way or the practice of liberation theology in CEBS. McGovern's work is both an apology for liberation theology and a necessary assessment of the strengths and weaknesses whereas Kee's is a less forgiving critique.
looking at the emancipatory potential of liberation theology and what it might require for its
recovery particularly through the work of Latin American and latina feminist theologians (chapter
four). The examination of this theology and its practices in CEBS follows on Gutiérrez's own
commitment to a consistency in theory and practice as well as a claim of the importance of
maintaining the currency of the emancipatory project. As he said,

The theology of liberation attempts to reflect on the experience and meaning of the faith
based on the commitment to abolish injustice and to build a new society; this theology
must be verified by the practice of that commitment, by active, effective participation in
the struggle which the exploited social classes have undertaken against their oppressors.
Liberation from every form of exploitation, the possibility of a more human and dignified
life, the creation of a new humankind -- all pass through this struggle.10

The resources for this sort of an enterprise derive not from outsiders with little familiarity of
either Latin America or liberation theology but from Latin American and latina feminists and
theorists of colour who have fought for recognition of their work from other more mainstream
liberatory discourses (a category in which I would place Gutiérrez's work today). These women
and men find their intellectual grounding in a diverse range of disciplines from theology,
international studies, anthropology, political science to literary criticism. By drawing on this
diversity of speakers and their backgrounds the dimensions from which to view liberation
theology and its presence in the lives of Latin American Christians are simultaneously broadened
and deepened. My intention was to remove the discussion of liberation theology beyond simply
its theological failures by focusing solely on the work of Gutiérrez and other theologians, to
demonstrate in fact how it erodes its opportunities for becoming a more vital link to emancipatory
programs through CEBS by not attending to dominating practices internally. A secondary intent

10 Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation. Revised Edition. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books,
sought to balance Gutiérrez's broadly descriptive analysis of domination with the more complex renderings offered with the benefit of accessing other disciplines thus revealing the actual complexity of the lives of people living under subordination. Here the usual object of discussion in the analysis of oppression ("the poor") is made more layered by appending themes like elitism to observe the ways in which Gutiérrez has left his privileged position unexamined by critique. A "church that is being born of the people" perhaps in reality is more of a myth than liberation theologians would care to admit.\(^\text{11}\)

Many of the elements that have disappeared in the work of Gutiérrez and are not emphasized in CEB practice are present elsewhere in the work of feminist theologians who sit on the margins of theological schools of thought. Six of these Latin American or latina feminist theologians are represented in chapter four with the purpose of contrasting their developments in the field of an emancipatory theology with that of Gutiérrez's.\(^\text{12}\) The work of each feminist theologian differs from the other while preserving a stronger emancipatory model for women and men than that found in the present work being undertaken by Gutiérrez.\(^\text{13}\) They have built, expanded, reconfigured liberation theology to contend with the specific oppressions of women while concurrently broadening the analysis of oppression to the manufacturing of theology itself. They


\(^{12}\) These feminist theologians are: Ivone Gebara, María Clara Bingemer, Ana María Bidegain, the women from "Talitha Cumi", María Pilar Aquino and Ada María Isasi-Díaz.

\(^{13}\) I am referring primarily to his revisions of *A Theology of Liberation* on its fifteenth anniversary (which coincided with the time period in which liberation theologians were under tremendous pressure from the Vatican to alter their theologies), *We Drink From Our Own Wells* and *The Truth Shall Make You Free*. 
look at issues such as divinity, kingdom, salvation and symbols like Mary to observe how androcentric hierarchies in the religious sphere contain the lives of women unjustly in all dimensions of social organization. They reshape these components to rid them of their dominating features to better reflect a vision of society without hierarchies that exclude others on the basis of gender, race and class. The theologies that emerge circulate on a social ethic that places the authority to make controversial decisions among the people they affect, and not in the institutions like the Church, that seem not to understand the intricacies of pressures facing women who must eke out a survival against formidable opposition. Feminist theologians practise the principle of asserting the right of those without political or social authority to be their own moral agents capable of thinking through their decisions without the guilt of having opposed the moral directives of an institution that, as Ada María Isasi-Díaz argues, is more interested in the "blind obedience" of Catholics today than in their capacity to lead their lives without intervention.\textsuperscript{14} The feminists that appear in chapter four of this work, begin their projects by acknowledging the Church's fully human status and as such its theologies and dictums as products of human invention.\textsuperscript{15} As feminist theologians they are less inclined to abide by any processes that cohere to the Church's policy of deciding moral and theological parameters under the authority of the purported "infallibility" of the Pope.\textsuperscript{16} Ada María Isasi-Díaz adds in her critique of the institutional


\textsuperscript{15} Isasi-Díaz, p. 149.

\textsuperscript{16} ibid., p. 144. The notion of infallibility stems from the Church's use of its authority and knowledge as being above human construct because of the institution's greater closeness to the deity. Therefore the source is not subject to contestation. If not stated blatantly by representatives from the Vatican this authority is understood although theoretically the Holy
Church that the "hierarchy will not see themselves following nor even being influenced by anyone else."¹⁷

The work of these feminist theologians is not exempt from both theoretical and methodological problems but their attention to ensuring a critical perspective has allowed them to better expose the multiplicity of strains of oppression. In part this critique is due to their more distant links with the institution than in the case of a theologian/priest like Gutiérrez who lives and works from inside the Church. Their exclusion from the Church allows them as feminists an intellectual liberty that their male colleagues must mediate more carefully. Notwithstanding this modicum of theological freedom (ironically predicated on their subordinate status), feminist theologians have also experienced the patronizing intentions of these same colleagues who have not openly embraced their (feminists') work or accepted them as equal partners in the folds of liberation theology.¹⁸ Regardless, enforced distance from the institution has allowed women to critique the Church's production of theology and moral dictates with more incisionary precision than their male colleagues. The distance has also granted them the flexibility to establish ties with the people they serve without the same dependency on institutional pressures as their male counterparts. And perhaps more dramatically, the estrangement has permitted them the freedom to reshape the features of Christianity in accord with their project of liberation.

In this dissertation I have purposely dealt with Gutiérrez's English publications since these are Spirit acts as a guiding principle to prevent error in the Church's judgement.

¹⁷ p. 145.
the texts through which he has chosen to be identified outside of Latin America thus allowing them to be viewed and critiqued from other subject positions. Although at every step of this process I have sought to avoid imposing inappropriate categories on either his work or the lives of Latin Americans, I have been aware of crossing figurative borders to Gutiérrez's cultural and geographical crossings. In contrast my crossing of borders has been to draw the voices of others not represented except as undefined gender neutral objects in Gutiérrez's work, into a discussion meant to provide critical new perspectives so that his voice alone does not define liberation theology's worth or indeed its content. These voices provide critique along with a new depth of knowledge not only on oppression but the possibilities for a liberating theology. These alternative subject positions are meant to intersect with that of Gutiérrez's at a level not seen in his own work and certainly not present in terms of available critiques on liberation theology presently. This work then fills a void in terms of understanding liberation theology long past the crossroad of choices that Gutiérrez once made in the early 1980s. The uniqueness of this work stands in the diversity of analyses represented by a multiplicity of subject sites. It allows Gutiérrez's work to be evaluated in terms of its actual emancipatory potential in the lives of Latin American women and men -- an essential ingredient if liberation theology is to secure its future in the emancipation of actual social conditions.

19 My critique is premised strictly on Gutiérrez's work. In no way should this critique be seen to reflect his person or his deep and persistent commitment to issues of social concern.

Chapter One

The Foundation

To begin, I am compelled to establish that while I speak of Latin American women, or of liberation theology and their histories in what might be viewed as homogeneous terms, I do not assume that Latin America or those who live on this continent can be placed into a singular static template that holds for this large land mass as though it were resting indolently waiting for shaping from its northern and European colonial and post-colonial influences. Rather, I begin with the assertion that Latin America is a continent dominated by immense diversity in history, peoples, geography and perhaps even more stunning -- incongruities brought on by its conflicting historical processes. As an example of this diversity, language need only be examined to see how it traverses across the continent through large urban centres, and small isolated communities representing the continuing evolution of long and complex historical workings. Accents, vocabulary and languages are evidence of a maze of histories of colonialism, ethnicity, economic development (and defining class distinctions), political leverage and certainly gender. So, indeed a rendering that failed to acknowledge these diverse and complex elements would result in a much skewed version of Latin America. And yet, this work may appear to do precisely what I have contended leads to damaging inaccuracies considering the differences that exist in Latin America. This work does not focus on one particular group of women, nor on any specific Christian Base Community or, for that matter any region for the simple reason that Latin America does share a history of subjugation, one that has infected the lives of women through culture, politics, economics and the authority of religion disseminated by the Catholic Church. Central in this
discussion is that while poor women and men share similar conditions, women's oppression is also
distinct from men's, a distinction not clarified or integrated into the work of liberation theologians,
or other social theorists. The form of this subjugation has yet to be given adequate attention in
analysis and publication. Nelly Richard has stated

   Even if only as a polemical notion of a 'difference' activated against the dominant international postmodern, "Latin America" designates a zone of experience (call it marginalization, dependency, subalternity, de-centering) common to all countries situated at the periphery of the dominant, Western model of centered modernity.¹

There are, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty says, ways in which transnational discussions facilitate
the articulation of the similarities in how women have been oppressed from which closer, more
microscopic examinations of the function of oppression in the lives of specific women can be
analyzed.² The importance, however in any examination is to note not only women's differences
from one another, but the ways in which oppression is historically embedded in their lives. When
viewed at the microscopic level, the legitimacy of women's suffering has often been denied its
reality or its interconnections to political and religious ideologies and practices. Women have
been envisioned in national rhetorics as static symbols resting on idealistic but mechanistic notions
of motherhood. The political and religious realms have been partners in this process of limiting
women's lives and capacity to create new avenues for themselves through powerful rhetorics that
define the limits of women's worth. The merging of these two realms (the political and religious)


for examination is not merely unavoidable but the essential link to disclosing the intricacies of women's oppression and why ultimately liberation theology did not evolve into an emancipatory project able to contend with the domination of women. Their existence has been limited to the home and the care of children by political and religious authorities whose influence is felt not simply at institutional levels but well into the determination of culture. The real lives of women who struggle to define, construct and survive in their own worlds are given little or no legitimacy beyond how well they adhere to national and religious ideologies of motherhood. The political and religious domains while separated by liberal parlance have done much to support one another in their subordination of the worth of women. When, therefore women's subordination is raised as a theme for analysis, how it has been buttressed by religious and nationalistic ideologies through "metaphoric depictions" of women meant to be understood as "natural" and "familial" is vital in discerning how oppression has insinuated itself in the so called public and private lives of women.3 Both religious and political institutions and movements have sought to narrow the expanse of choices for women in their public portrayals. They have assumed that all women if not the same are desirous of the same objectives and as such have depicted women as not simply outside the realm of action, change and movement but incapable of movement, intellectual enterprise or engagement in political and economic leaderships. In this history of subjugation in Latin America similarities in type, method of establishment and results seem to cross national borders rigidly becoming patterned in the evolution of everyday life where women have battled to move beyond simple survival. So while diversity among people is recognized as a pivot from

which domination must be squashed similarities in how oppression functions are to be noted, analyzed and then responded to according to the means and capacities of various groups. This work, therefore is a critique on the level of theory and not of anthropological study. The groups in this discussion of most interest are the ones having either been founded on the principles and methods of liberation theology or having discovered themselves in contentious strain with both the ethics and aims of this theology. More exactly this means looking at the Catholic Church as an institution, women and men who have participated in Christian Base Communities (CEBS) committed to liberation theology and therefore to political action, as well as priests, religious and theologians from all sides of the debate in order to bring both depth and clarity to the question of gender's exclusion from liberation theology's theory and method. In addition, it means marking moments of historical significance that alter the discourse but signify where even the most seemingly emancipatory pulsations have engrained themselves in securing the life span of the status quo. Two important assumptions grow from this discussion, first that women in Latin America have been subjugated to such pervasive and invasive degrees of oppression that analysis of this phenomenon continues to skim only the surface of what remains an immensely complex and bewildering network. And secondly, that women in Church groups even those founded on the principles of liberation theology generally have not been given access into the theoretical enclaves of feminism.⁴ This is but one example of the threads that regardless of visibility in society have fed into other schemes that function to limit assessments of women's identities. Clearly these structures found in such institutions as the Catholic Church, aside from their

⁴ Jean Franco, "Going Public: Reinhabiting the Private," in On Edge: The Crisis of Contemporary Latin American Culture edited George Yudice et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p.68
intentions, can and do stifle political activism.\textsuperscript{5}

This brief introduction to the first chapter has followed the course of what in fact could be the defining feature of Latin America -- the layering of a multitude of seemingly dissonant elements that subvert the plan to clarify. What follows is no less incongruous and purposely so. This chapter attempts to provide an axis on which following chapters balance and build. While the two sections are distant from one another in theme and method their juxtaposition in the same chapter serves several purposes. The first is to provide the feminist grounding on which the entire work is founded and secondly, to define critically, albeit briefly, the social and political factors that have influenced the work of liberation theologians. Finally, the placing of feminism and liberation theology side by side is meant to illustrate the immense incongruity of liberation theology's failure to draw feminist theory into its own project so that it might emerge not simply as an emancipatory support for women but, for all elements in society by attending to its skills to critique by employing consistent ties between theory and praxis. In the chapters that follow these two areas, (feminism and the social and political context of Church and society) are not separated as they are here but intricately interwoven into both the content and the analysis. The discussion on feminist theory and the historical underpinnings of liberation theology here should be viewed as initiatory entries into what will grow in complexity and meaning later. In other words, these sections are not awkward incongruities but two important vehicles central to the process of disclosing the system of oppression under which Latin American women have lived.

**Feminist Theory and Practice**

The question to begin with is why feminism or feminist theory should be relevant to the lives of Latin American women, or indeed to liberation theology. Encoded in this question is why feminism has not become an integral analytic tool and method in Christian Base Communities where women have had such a prominent participatory presence. In part, the answer resides more closely to the workings of liberation theology and those who dispersed its methods than to feminism's own internal problems. Feminism's absence in a movement that sought to undercover and rid society of damaging injustices is curious but logical in light of liberation theology's close albeit contentious ties to the institutional Church, and of the limited awareness of questions that would illuminate the oppressions specific to women by those leading discussions on liberation. The result is a theology that while hopeful on one level is unable to meet its own emancipatory aims due in part to its failure to understand how women's subordination is not an isolated appendage of oppression unworthy of concentrated attention and effort but intrinsic to all operations of oppression in political, economic and human terms. Within the same context feminism does not necessarily need to function as simply a venue for women but can, when allowed rise to its potential, announce the possibility for a "general social and cultural transformation that will involve other sectors and other forms of critical discourse." It strives to provide possibilities for critical thought and action not addressed in a patriarchal society as it presses for a "more human and more open civilization and culture." As for the Church, the

---


7 Ola, p. 200.
question of women's liberation is embedded in a long history of women's exclusion from its administrative and knowledge centres. Liberation theologians' insistence on remaining within the Church given the clarity of the Church's unjust exclusion of women is perhaps the surprising factor. The Church, for its part, continues to disperse what Mohanty identifies as "ideologies of seclusion and the domestication of women" that defend the "notions of protectionism and property" under a myth of heterosexuality designating women as wives and mothers. For liberation theologians trained under the authority of the institutional Church and its imaging of women, feminism's absence in CEB practices is hardly a startling revelation.

Feminism in Latin America has the advantage of not being dependent on institutions for legitimation and of coming in such an array of forms and practices that allow for at the very least on the theoretical level the possibility of much more diverse participation. Throughout Latin America, discussions considering what constitutes a feminist act or indeed theory have certainly been divisive and yet this very ambiguity may also be feminism's strength in drawing women and even men into discussions who otherwise might decline. This ambiguity that challenges the quality of the feminist enterprise in Latin America stems from the way in which women have had to align their theories and practices to the contexts of their lives often sitting at odds with the type of feminism found among North American activists.

As Geraldine Heng has commented,

Third World feminisms do not have the luxury of predictability; and a feminist theory that would be global in its compass, as in its intentions, must expect to be surprised by the strategies, appearance, and forms of feminisms that emerge and are effective in third-world

---

The problem lies in discerning feminist activities and objectives from the organizing women undertake to increase the survival rates of themselves, their families and their communities. Those projects sponsored by the Church while supportive of women and skilful in opening venues for women to articulate the mandates of their project, may not be the forum through which women develop a feminist consciousness to view the ways in which subordination is integrated beyond politicking into the very fabric of culture itself. Nor may these projects encourage approaches that allow for distinct political and social visions. Such survival movements, as Jean Franco describes them, are the outcome of political climates that have found the state unable to "deal with the day-to-day survival of its citizens" as opposed to working for a critical emancipatory outcome.\(^9\) The quandary raised at the outset of this section as to what feminism might have to offer even survival movements rests in its refusal to relent in exposing domination or providing practical alternatives to living. Feminism has the capacity to bridge the larger picture of oppression often more clearly seen in institutions with the way in which oppression filters into the actual living experiences of people's lives. Sandra Harding has said that the feminist project can perceive and act on what liberalism cannot, primarily how the "sex/gender system interacts with the 'macro' social institutions" but then how it is extended into daily life where elements once


\(^{10}\) Jean Franco, p. 68.
considered outside of the sex/gender system are now seen to be contingent on this very reality. A feminist analysis exposes those places where the sex/gender system is in place. And feminism, particularly in its development of theory has shown itself better equipped than liberation theology to gaze inwards on itself to view its own inadequacies and deficiencies. Again in Harding's definition of patriarchy, one that could be extended to Latin America,

male dominance [is] made possible by men's control of women's productive and reproductive labor, where 'reproduction' is broadly construed to include sexuality, family life, and kinship formations as well as birthing which biologically reproduces the species.

This definition raises questions of how women's lives are affected in their daily operations by patriarchy. Even though popular culture mythologizes the authority women hold in their homes, the reality is that they may hold some limited "ritual powers of considerable significance to themselves as well as men, but women never dominate in rules requiring the participation of the

---


12 An example of this is in the failure to account for the distinctiveness of the lives of women of colour who were locked out of participating in the feminist movement or bringing in their theories and methods that sat in contrast to those of white middle class women in North America who had essentially led and continue to dominate the field. This has certainly not been resolved but the fact that women of colour are publishing, and leading political projects suggests that feminism allows itself to be expanded albeit inadequately but in ways that mainstream liberation theology has not ventured.

community as a whole."14

Through feminism, women's invisibility while not eradicated has had a more deliberate chance of being recognized by political and social groups and systems. The terms by which activism is conceived in Latin America by feminist theory have been expanded accounting for what is often noted as methods that elude the rigid hierarchical formation that leads to a titular head. Feminism has also worked to expose the myth of a private sphere sequestered off to one side unaffected by the machinations of the so-called public world.15 Feminism blasts away myths where they exist, but myths that have had a powerful impact on how women have known themselves. As an example, in the work of Ada María Isasi-Díaz the traditional artifice that defines those as elites in society through their professional training and therefore anointed with the capacity to speak for and about society is dismantled. She views in women, often poor women, the rationale behind their moral and intellectual decisions based on the pressures and confines of their lives. Isasi-Díaz is attempting to disengage traditional notions of the sources of knowledge so that society is not left with a dominating binary distinguished by those who are received as "ignorant" in need of the direction of those who are "experts" often because of the position of power they hold in society.16 A dualism of this sort feeds the practices of the status quo that divides people along a long list of characteristics. Those therefore who are placed at the level of holding greater knowledge by weight of their gender, class, or race are seeking to "augment one's own force, authority, or

14 ibid, quoting M.Z. Rosaldo, p. 313.

15 Carolyn Hardy-Fanta, p. 19.

influence and also to control and limit others -- that is to exercise dominion or to dominate" even if that might mean within the narrow focus of one's family or social group.¹⁷

Unlike liberation theology, feminism has few ambiguous ties to political activism. The nature of its analysis and its goals suggest that political engagement in a wide range of forms is vital to women's tearing down of dominating practices and systems. Its purpose is to secure a vision of citizenry vastly different from the one in current use that impedes women's participation. As Carolyn Hardy-Fanta states, citizenry must extend beyond legalistic definitions to include a more participatory democracy whereby the

> citizenry becomes a 'dynamic relationship among strangers who are transformed into neighbors, whose commonality derives from expanding consciousness rather than geographical proximity....Community, citizenship, and participation are thus in a dialectic relationship.'¹⁸

Hardy-Fanta's definition of the Hispanic community can be transferred to feminism's aspiration for women who, the hope is, will seek to establish a community that respects individuality but supports the collective without limiting citizenry to the "interaction of individuals with institutions."¹⁹ This form of citizenry proposed by Hardy-Fanta but suitable for feminist claims, emerges from her observations of Latinas in Boston who she found organized and functioned at their best around broader and more flexible participatory models that were devoid of formalistic personality centred leaderships. Feminism has been adept in not only exposing with acuity the dimensions of oppressions of undisclosed injustices but in formulating options for alternative

---

¹⁷ ibid, p. 30.

¹⁸ p. 100.

¹⁹ p. 100.
models, including new ways of understanding citizenship. The dual pronged task of feminism is both one of deconstructive critique and a practice that attempts to implement its theories (aware of the nonlinear progression of liberation). Critique in feminism in recent years has been forced to be internalized as issues of exclusion, voice appropriation and racism have risen from women of colour. The result has been intense anger against white middle class North American feminists who have spoken for women of colour or "third world" women without considering how the lives of women not privileged by virtue of colour, class and nationhood might be marked by oppressions distinct from their own.\textsuperscript{20} While the debate continues important work is now emerging from women of colour once subsumed under a generalized notion of the "oppressed woman."\textsuperscript{21} Perhaps unique to the theories evolving from the work of feminists of colour is the capacity to continue the analysis of classism and racism as key categories to detailing the operating mechanisms of the sex/gender system. Feminists of colour have pushed both analysis and theory into new directions making meaningful a feminist discourse that held little significance for a vast number of women who were left unrepresented in the past. Instead what is currently being built is an "interactive notion of gender and race whereby women's gendered identity is grounded in race and people of color's racial identities are gendered."\textsuperscript{22} In this way a vital tension


\textsuperscript{21} This is not so unlike liberation theology that categorized all oppressed people under the label of "the poor." The difference being that feminism attempts a self-critique, one that will allow it to be transformed by new knowledge from other quarters whereas liberation theology continues to resist its own transformation by pressures from outside the institution.

\textsuperscript{22} Mohanty, p. 18.
within feminism itself is preserved to circumvent the erosion of its applicability. The tension caused by the diversity of voices debating from within feminism forces an internal critique of how feminisms are proceeding unlike the current culture around mainstream liberation theology in Latin America that seems to have settled into an institutionalization of both its method and theory. Third-World feminisms draw into the discourse colonialism, race, gender, class, capitalism and how each of these has been imploded on "sexual and familial figurations" in ways in which North American white middle class feminism has been so negligent or incapable of exposing. Through the interweaving of such a diversity of categories, women's knowledge about the construction of oppression is heightened to the point that it is better able to acknowledge the multiple forms through which oppression takes root and from this organize projects and movements so as not to elide these often hidden factors but to do battle with them.

In Latin America feminism is of added interest for its emergence during times when nationalism is being debated, contested or in the case of national security governments used to reaffirm the myth of the woman in her domicile as the rallying cry for the defence of the state. Traditionally military governments and progressive movements have viewed feminism as an agent working against the security of the nation in support of the interests of superpowers with agendas aimed at dividing national interests. Unfortunately this has left Latin American feminists, already vulnerable to forced seclusion, scrambling to claim their allegiance to the rhetoric of nationalism sometimes at the cost of feminist principles through the adoption of "protofeminist myths, laws,

\[\text{Mohanty, p. 28.}\]

\[\text{ibid, p. 28.}\]

\[\text{Heng, p. 31.}\]
customs, characters, narratives and origins in the national or communal past or in strategic interpretations of religious history or law." Once again, the difficult task is in separating a feminist project exempt of nationalistic ideologies from one that claims feminism but is in essence a reconfiguration of the normative culture but not its dissolution. The task of evaluating is an essential one particularly for an emancipatory claiming theory or project in order to ensure its integrity and consistency in matters of praxis. In the case of feminist theologians the critique must evaluate the extent to which they develop their work within the cultural context promoting its myths, rituals and practices. The question is, have they established enough autonomy from the influence of nationalism's ideologies to construct an emancipatory theology devoid of the elements that re-entrench domination? For instance, have theologians thoroughly investigated the extent to which images used in cultural practices are able to secure emancipatory aims when tied to long histories of oppression? Here I would raise the problematic use of Mary as an emancipatory symbol by feminist theologians. The very kind of symbol that is easily utilised by nation building governments.

All nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous....They represent relations to political power and to the technologies of violence...legitimacy, or limiting people's access to the rights and resources of the nation-state.  

The prerogative of feminist theory is to prod its own limits to avoid being entrapped in a theory

---

26 ibid, p. 34.

no longer able to discern the "power relations" within its own practice or beyond. Since this task is enormous the necessity for branches within feminism is clear where theoretical practice and development is expanded not narrowed. The survival of feminism is contingent on its political activism with critique as its funneling source even when feminism must exert its pressure from inside a movement or group, like those attached to the Church. Theologians who drain the analysis of its critical edge, of its courage to expose injustice do so at the expense of diminishing the potential for liberation. The result is a "depoliticized environment" with little or no practical application or force to pressure mainstream practices.

A depoliticized environment may hold as its focal point ideologies promoting pluralism; however, the use of pluralism from within a "neo-liberal" discourse negates the existence of gender, race and class as categories through which individuals may be assigned varying levels of authority in society. Neo-liberalism's rhetoric calls for equality and justice but fails to enact an analysis or program to broaden democratic practices that might threaten the stability of current political and social systems. Latina or Latin American feminism instead of falling into a trap of broad political statements on equality assumes a position of the distinctiveness of human identities, motives, and lives driven by a plethora of influences within cultural, economic and political structures. Chicana feminists Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa define these differences in and against other forms of feminism and mainstream practices. In part to disengage


29 Franco, p. 79.

30 On Edge p. ix.
homogeneity and liberal discourse from using difference as simply a rhetorical tool to substantiate its own existence, Gloria Anzaldúa looks at theory and evaluates what its purpose should and could be allowing for differences among people that instead of solidifying the hierarchies found in even the most democratic countries, lead individuals to define themselves against the ideology promoting an illusory equality of opportunity. Theory, as Anzaldúa explains, is a 

mental viewing, an idea or mental plan of the way to do something, and a formulation of apparent relationships or underlying principles of certain observed phenomena which had been verified to some degree. To have theory meant to hold considerable evidence in support of a formulated general principle explaining the operation of certain phenomena.31

Anzaldúa, like Isasi-Díaz uses this definition to allow for knowledge and its development to be conceded by way of experience and reflection on experience releasing the legitimacy of theory from the traditional power centres and placing it wherever an individual or a group might be engaged in a process of actively attempting to understand the meaning of social and political conditions. Primary to Anzaldúa's re-articulation of the definition of theory is her insistence to deconstruct all power systems that have eliminated people of colour from active engagement in the full spectrum of social and political construction and citizenry. Her definition allows a myriad of peoples trained and untrained to theorize about their lives, or their visions for a different political and social climate. In this way the space where theory is done and by whom is never left solely to those whose profession assigns them the status of a "specialist." Instead what occurs is the emergence of new voices and with them new methodologies are added to a corpus that remains in constant dialectical flux. Theories, however, as Anzaldúa demonstrates, come in a diversity of forms some of which may not meet the requirements as theories by the academy or

31 Gloria Anzaldúa, p. xxv.
vice versa by women of colour.\textsuperscript{32} They remain theories nonetheless for their capacity "to change people and the way they perceive the world."\textsuperscript{33} In the end, these new theories, so Anzaldúa proposes, will form the nexus from which "race, class, gender and ethnicity" will all be rewritten to become "theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries -- new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods."\textsuperscript{34} Her critique is both a rejection of the position of authority, its hold on knowledge that white elites have secured for themselves and an idealistic notion of possibilities as still not fully realized for Latinas/Chicanas. The political undercurrent to Anzaldúa's work is her refusal to request space to do theorizing. Instead she legitimizes work already being done by surfacing the spaces in which theorizing is occurring at the edges of hegemonic discourses. New formulations bring confidence to think and the hope that there still remain unchartered territories for enacting change. Claiming (not requesting) the space to speak about the why of how conditions have come to be as they are is in itself a sonorous "no" to imposed seclusion. It is a political response to "white noise, distance and the distancing by others who don't want to hear."\textsuperscript{35} The danger, in any claim to subjectivity, is in adopting the voice, theories, and methodologies of "the master" -- seeing the world through those eyes rather than the eyes of the subject who is aware of who she is culturally, sexually, ethnically, economically and socially.\textsuperscript{36} A critical feminism calls for a more autonomous position, one where the theorist knows the world of the

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{32}{Anzaldúa, p. xxv.}
\footnote{33}{ibid, p. xxv.}
\footnote{34}{p. xxv.}
\footnote{35}{p. xxii.}
\footnote{36}{p. xxiii.}
\end{footnotes}
academic as well as her own world but, can express herself in both arenas allowing her to use the world of the elite to bring greater justice to her own community. And finally, she is the theorist who is both the thinker and practitioner of her ideas. Anzaldúa and Moraga have critically explored issues of subjectivity and forms of contestation. Their objective is to encourage a subjectivity that will challenge the communities they live in and beyond but without the notion of heroes as the vehicle through which movements are impelled to take up the call of a form of political mobilization.

Generally women's aim in Latin American emancipatory programs appears neither to seek out nor to create for themselves the conditions that would place them as the figure head on which a social movement or program is predicated. Hardy-Fanta contends women are more interested in relationships as they "weave the personal and political development into their mobilizing work."37 In her work with Latinas/os in Boston Hardy-Fanta found women tended to emphasize the importance of the group motivating others to become engaged in a process that highlights the relevance of attending to individual occurrences in daily life thus ensuring the survival of the group by committing to the well being of the group's members.38 Encouraging women to speak about what they consider significant in their lives seems to set the foundation for their continued presence in groups working for change. When these Bostonian women were enjoined to participate in a structure hierarchically organized and where control of the agenda was lost to them, their political commitment to the group became "stifled."39

37 Hardy-Fanta, p. 74
38 ibid, p. 79.
39 p. 84.
The ease with which women's advancements can be dismantled forcing women to return to secluded lives is a primary reason why Latina feminists fear that a postmodernist feminism that discounts the relevance of experience will only exclude women from engaging in a process that allows them access to a discourse aimed specifically at their experience as oppressed women. In speaking of their lives, Hardy-Fanta sees Latina women begin to develop opinions and strategies for action beyond the seclusion of their personal lives. Their commitment is strengthened by their own knowledge and the support of the group itself. Instead of the "political muting" that occurs to "render people unable to speak, either because of intimidation, a sense of inadequacy, or organizational structures", through the conscious production of a space and a method that is alert to women's lives women are more likely to see the benefits of social action.

Latin American women and Chicana/Latinas have the difficult task of amassing identities for themselves from a complex of fragmented images acquired through the centuries long process of colonialism. Many of these women are marked by their brown or black skin, their dark eyes and hair that across the Americas sets them apart from the level of society that wields the political and social power that determines the structure of society. Their darker skin colour beginning with

---

40 p. 97.

41 p. 84.

42 I have had a difficult time deciding on what to use as I refer to women who live in the United States but whose identities/colour etc...identify them as "hispanics" by the dominant white culture. Ana Castillo in *Massacre of the Dreamers* critiques this term as one that depoliticizes the potential and actual activities of latinas. The term "hispanic" attempts to homogenize women under a label that fails to define the diversity of language, culture and histories of peoples who come from a large stretch of diverse geographical homes. And since women in the United States now claim labels ranging from chicanas, mujeristas, and xicanistas I will appropriate Castillo's own term "chicanas/latinats" while recognizing its inadequacies as well.
colonialism has marked their lives profoundly. Colour tone continues to be used as a marker for those who are given greater access to authority. The whiter the skin the more educated, more able minded individuals are and therefore more capable to look after those who, by nature of their skin tone are unable to care adequately for themselves much less the state. Colonialism began the process that designated the white European extracted male as the authority by which the quality of women's lives would be decided in what became an aggrandizement of the notion of family for the defense of the state.\textsuperscript{43}

Our internalized racism causes us to boast of our light coloring, if indeed we have it, or imagine it. We hope for light-skinned children and brag no end of those infants who happen to be born \textit{gueros}, white looking, we are downright ecstatic if they have light colored eyes and hair. We sometimes tragically reject those children who are dark.\textsuperscript{44}

Many Latinas are marked by their \textit{mestizaje} meaning that their identities border on several cultures and ethnicities. Even still, \textit{mestizaje} originates from the colonial project that used indigenous and black peoples as the peons in the production of a new social and political order. Women who are also mestizas border on a heterogeneity complete with contesting ideological and metaphorical symbols that complicate their status in society if not their own conception of identity in what of the many identities they hold should assume precedence.

In a constant state of mental nepantilism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways, la mestiza is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual or multilingual, speaking patois, and in a state of perpetual transition, the mestiza faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which

\textsuperscript{43} McClintock, p. 91.

collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to? 

The multiple nature of identity has meant that Latin American women and Chicana/Latinas are pressed into being flexible bridging histories, cultures and expectations. Latin American feminists view this flexibility as a forte of Latin Americans that will lead women eventually to choose and emphasize dimensions of themselves not predicated on "customary" patterns. Nevertheless, Paula Moya warns that any creativity that measures itself on traditional symbols like La Malinche or Mary must be penetrated by critique to squash the tendency of idolizing symbols that can not be lifted out from their historical use as tools to control women. Designs to emancipate these symbols according to Moya ignore their part in the complex of women's oppression, while concurrently diminishing the primacy of history in understanding the roots from which invidious forms of oppression have been established. The history of women's oppression situates current analyses, without which there is little on which to fathom how women's subordination became insinuated into institutional and social divisions of human life.


46 Gloria Anzaldúa, p. 379.

47 Paula L. Moya, "Postmodernism, "Realism" and the Politics of Identity: Cherrie Moraga and Chicana Feminism," in Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures, eds. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 130. Much work is being done on the image of "La Malinche" enaptured in popular culture as the enemy of the Mexican people at the time of the Conquest. As the Aztec daughter of a noble family and named Malindi she was given to Cortes to serve as his "mistress" and translator. See Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women. By Jeanette Rodriguez. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994). pp. 72ff. Her account is useful in that she outlines the interpretations given to La Malinche by other leading Mexican writers.
So much of Latin American and Chicana feminism is rooted in discerning the suffering of women marginalized by culture, ethnicity and gender. For many, the postmodern tendency to do away with identity or eliminate experience as a category of analysis or a basis on which to build a movement elides the real suffering Latin Americans contend with or how women understand themselves in the world that has denied them an identity of their own construction. In order for their projects to maintain political commitment, identity and experience (not perceived in some hegemonic sense, but rather in terms of heterogeneity) must be defined. The feminist project, as Latin American feminists envision it, is to eliminate all forms of destructive domination in a process beginning with women unearthing the deepest cords of that domination in their lives.48

A politics of discourse that does not provide for some sort of bodily or concrete action outside the realm of the academic text will forever be inadequate to change the difficult 'reality' of our lives.49

Postmodernism neglects to respect in its discourse that women living on the margins in Latin America must combat the tentacles of oppression daily that limit the scope of possibilities for survival. Oppression identifies them with images that are not fully human nor fully enabling of creating a life based on opportunity and not on restraint. Daily, women are denied the type of opportunity that spans the spectrum of experience rooted in the details of living that include the right to make financial decisions for their families, to how they might wish to express their sexuality internally or externally to heterosexual ideologies. Feminism’s responsibility, as Ana Castillo writes, lies in providing a diversity of tools so that women might begin the task of


49 ibid, p. 135.
unmasking how these limitations have come to be and what the possibilities are for rejecting their value in women's own evaluations of themselves. Such unmasking, as if in response to postmodernism's denial of the existence of self, is in fact to affirm the necessity of building a self or selves that reject images of domination. The master, in the words of Anzaldúa, has done precisely what postmodernism appears to be intimating -- an erasure of the possibility of a self. This has left women labouring to abide by images that although two dimensional have been forcefully integrated into exclusionary practices used to limit women's freedom. "As Mexic Amerindians we must, to find a clue as to who we are and from whom we descend, become akin to archaeologists." For Latinas the archaeological process while a piecemeal method must still begin with seeing themselves as individuals not as fragments or as selves predicated on essentialist notions of "woman" or stereotypes found in popular culture. Rather the process demands that individuals come to understand, through a critical mediation on their world, who they are and want to be without ever forgetting the extent to which these systems of oppression will continue to mark their lives through culture, politics, and economics. Strangely this inward focus that explores both possibilities and the mechanisms of power is in itself an act against the stereotype of the sacrificing woman who ignores the self for the benefit of the family. Postmodernism's reputation in addressing the subtleties of women's survival tactics has ignored the practicalities of resistance or women's material selves. It ignores that women who have struggled to survive have had to know and understand the "master" in more intricate detail than the master has ever known

50 Ana Castillo, Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma pp. 224ff.

51 Castillo, p. 6.
the slave. Feminist theorists from Latin America are now contending that women must reuse that knowledge they have of the master by opposing power's insertion into the development of their identities. "It has been said of me and my writing that I am in search of identity, as indeed we all are, which is a fact of living in a world of fragmented selves."53

New discourses develop that allow women to assess their situations in a fashion that contains within it an element of contestation. "Censorship" as Castillo describes it, is a principal tool of oppression meant to deny people of colour access to full citizenship and therefore a space in which to construct alternative forms of nationalism.54 Castillo's fear is as women gain stronger political voices they must be careful not to use those voices to re-entrench social identities along the lines of the "dutiful citizen" that work to reinstate the authority of reigning ideologies. Yet, with voices that remain critical, Castillo maintains women can undermine the processes that lead to censorship by challenging the domination embedded in the cultural identities used to secure national symbols.55

The ideology embedded within the discourse of nationalism has meant that women of colour have had to pay with their bodies through labour in order to feed the success of the project. While nationalism exhorts the rights of all citizens, in reality women are assigned a position of marginal duty that demands of them more work at home and in the workforce for the rights to a limited

52 Castillo, p. 4ff.

53 ibid, p. 8.

54 Castillo, pp. 21ff.

55 p. 31.
citizenship.56

Nationalism's birth in the nineteenth century came with the promise for a new age of participation in society if not also equality for its citizens.57 In the end, for many Latin American women nationalism imposes the cementing of two unworkable choices in terms of identity. They have had to look to either the temptress Eve who destroys humanity's potential for goodness or Mary, Eve's redeemed foil. Mary willingly sacrifices her humanity for some male ideal of womanhood out of duty to serve the needs and desires of others. Her example has come to represent the obligation women have to shelter the stability of the nation itself.58 Even in present progressive circles the impulse is toward a nationalism that speaks of the "people" as though it were a unitary body representing one goal, one method and one image all predicated on an "'urban, male, vanguardist, and violent'" model.59

Because the methods and theories inherent in the practices of nationalism are directed at

56 Ana Castillo speaks a version of this when she describes the situation of chicanas/os who have lived on their lands for generations but who must continue to pay over and over again for not merging with the "melting pot" "even though they are not immigrants". Castillo, Massacre of the Dreamers, p. 2ff.

57 While the historical project of independence and the building of the nation state is distinct for each region in Central and South America -- the method behind nationalism that creates separate identities for each new country in order to build allegiance, and a sense of "brotherhood" appears to be a general condition of the process. Novelists in Latin America have responded to the processes of nation building from various vantage points. To see how writers have interpreted efforts at solidifying identities through the rhetoric of nationalism see: Doris Sommer, "Irresistible romance: the foundational fictions of Latin America," in Nation and Narration, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), or House, Garden, Nation: Space, Gender and Ethnicity in Post Colonial Latin American Literatures By Women. By Ileana Rodriguez (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994).

58 p. 106.

59 McClintock quoting Terrence Eagleton, p. 96.
fabricating claims of sameness and cohesiveness, Anzaldúa and Moraga remind those intending to launch social groups that feminism, like any emancipatory project, must forge a course that avoids essentializing "women of colour", "third world women", or "poor women" under the assumption that all women share oppressions or methods in theory and practice. Women are not innately inclined to group under a banner of sameness by virtue of their gender.  

The goals of nationalism that seek homogeneity among a group of people in order to protect borders and ensure political and economic growth and expression and conflict in all institutions and in culture itself. The extent to which the Catholic Church has participated in this process of affixing gendered national identities by "enforc[ing] sexual repression...with a vengeance" can be witnessed in how liberation theology grew and then declined under pressures of an institution unwilling to relent in its authority to dispense the virtues and moral prerogatives of peoples. Liberation theology, nevertheless, played a role in the development or enforcement of national identities not seeing how people were different from one another beyond the category of class. In later years, as Gustavo Gutiérrez retreated further from an analysis of materialism, his insights on the conditions of people's lives became less one of expressing its reality and diversity (although here he never developed an adequate analysis), to one imposing an identity of spiritual contentedness in one's poverty. Liberation theology, at a level of publication and promotion, has always presented homogenous identities. These problems demonstrate how compelling cohesive

60 Paula M.L. Moya, p. 125.

61 p. 128.

62 For examples of this read his The Truth Shall Make You Free and We Drink From Our Own Wells.
identities are but how damaging they are to those who fail to meet the mark as women continually do. The problem lay not with women but with the errors in method of the project itself. This next section breaks with the discussion of feminism but, at the same time, attempts to illuminate and build on the problems which liberation theology through Gustavo Gutiérrez found itself faced with that made it unable or unwilling to address the distinct oppressions women encounter.

The Church, the State, Liberation Theology and Gustavo Gutiérrez

Often when the history of liberation theology is recounted, Vatican II, the Cuban Revolution, the emergence of new theories like that of dependence theory attempting to explain the origin of poverty (or underdevelopment in the language of developmentalists popular in the 1960s), Catholic Action, the Medellin conference of Latin American Catholic bishops, and the rise of national security governments are chronicled to explain how the social and political conditions were ripe for a radically new theology. While this is all true the list tends to gloss over the finer intricate complexities that have imposed themselves on the development of liberation theology. The Medellin conference in 1968 announced a dramatic new direction in terms of the Church's

---

63 Much has been written on this process and for this reason I have chosen not to elaborate. See Penny Lernoux's *Cry of the People* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980) as an earlier but compelling account of the emergence of liberation theology and the role of the church in Latin America. See also Phillip Berryman's *Liberation Theology: The Essential Facts about the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America and Beyond* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987). Nearly any work on liberation theology has a short history of its growth. This would include works by theologians themselves or those writing on it; for example Arthur F. McGovern in *Liberation Theology and Its Critics: An Assessment* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990). Other accounts can be found in the work of Daniel Levine, Scott Mainwaring, as scholars who have studied the church and the rise in CEBS or in Mainwaring's case the move toward democracy. Others like Sonia Alvarez and Arturo Escobar while not writing on liberation theology principally have examined its impact and importance on social movements.
understanding of how it might address the poverty of Latin Americans in this only the second meeting of the Latin American Bishops' Council (CELAM). Normally estranged from the harsh realities their parishioners were living the bishops found themselves confronted with new, profoundly riveting analyses on the intersection of theology and social conditions. Even so, as Penny Lernoux has said, the bishops

missed the heart of the matter: that the Medellin documents were a revolutionary call to work for social justice, placing the Church in open conflict with the moneyed classes that for centuries had been its political and economic mainstay.64

The Medellin documents were written mostly by young prelates or technicians like Gustavo Gutiérrez who hoped to construct a theology that worked from "reality to idea" or from "The Event...to the Word" based on their use of Marxist theory and their knowledge of the injustice of class in their countries.65 The documents pushed for a political involvement on theologians' belief that the Church had the responsibility to intercede directly to attend to the misery in which the poor were living. By 1972 many bishops after witnessing the result of student unrest and protest began to withdraw their support from the Medellin documents.66 Later, Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, a conservative archbishop from Colombia as the secretary general of the Latin American Bishops Council (CELAM) would, as he organized the next bishops' council in Puebla Mexico in 1979, seek to limit the influence progressive priests and theologians had on more conservative bishops.67


65 Lernoux, p. 30.

66 ibid, p. 44.

The decade following Medellin was filled with violence in most of Latin America with Chile and Argentina falling to military governments behind Brazil (Brazil's coup occurred in 1964). The atmosphere was charged by the brutality with which governments were responding to social movements in the climactic rise of atrocities and massacres in military and paramilitary operations. In the midst of this the institutional Church found itself grappling, unsure of its role in these polarized times, while concurrently preoccupied with the sudden growth of Christian Base Communities actively engaged in emancipatory processes. By 1979, and the next bishops' meeting in Puebla Mexico (a city chosen for its religious conservatism) the conflicting strains within the Church were apparent to the entire world. Lopez Trujillo, having organized the meeting was publicly criticizing liberation theology and its plea for a more democratic Church. He kept liberation theologians as distant as possible from the main venue of the conference as he pleaded with bishops to bring the Church back into the traditional fold to avoid an internal rupture brought on by a divided Church.

At Puebla and more importantly in the years following, Lopez Trujillo gathered a growing number of bishops from Latin America in support of his position on liberation theology's dangers. In the Vatican their position was embraced by Cardinal Ratzinger who, with Pope John Paul II's ascension to the papacy, now headed the disciplinary arm of the Vatican known as The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This provided the conservative wing of the Church in Latin America with both authority and power in their claims. Ratzinger, in his written disapproval

---

68 For an interesting first hand description of this meeting read Archbishop Romero's diary. Su Diario published by the Salvadoran archbishop's office, 1989.
of liberation theology in the mid 1980s said that liberation theology procured only illusory hope for people who were better off with an orthodox theology explicitly "telling [them] what to do."\(^{69}\) For Pope Jean Paul II, at least initially, it seemed more a question of losing "large numbers of dissident Catholics."\(^{70}\)

The institutional Church of the 1970s was very different from the one that would re-establish itself throughout the 1980s. The brief aperture allowed in by Medellin and the desperate need for a Church able to denounce the atrocities of the state had permitted a place through which essentially an egalitarian movement (liberation theology) could insert itself within an institution (the Catholic Church) still bent on maintaining its power through the lines of its established hierarchy. This possibility raised the hope of those social activists (like some feminists) who saw a way of being both political and still a Catholic. Liberation theology from within the institution suggested the Church could be transformed to align itself more concretely with social justice. Democracy or a version of it was evident in the practices of progressively run CEBS that like the larger Church functioned to challenge the policies and activities of military run governments. CEBS had a slight advantage over secular social movements in that there was a minimal degree of security provided by the Church that the others lacked.\(^{71}\) By the 1980s the aperture that allowed liberation theology to find a significant space for contestation was severely tested by Vatican


\(^{70}\) Lernoux, p. 97.

\(^{71}\) This is not to suggest that CEBS were not attacked and brutally so. In some instances CEBS were in fact the targets of military governments (El Salvador would be a case in point), nevertheless, the Church at the very least could offer the cover of its material resources including its building and its capacity to influence political forces.
pressures, and the transformation of military governments to democratic ones throughout Latin America that forced liberation theologians and CEB participants to rethink their methods and objectives. Even though the Puebla bishops' council in 1979 received a variety of mixed reviews by both conservatives and progressives who felt it had either gone too far in one direction or simply not far enough in the other this council seems now to stand as that quintessential marker that divides historical events in terms of their rise to prominence and their decline. The 1980s developed into a collective campaign to denounce the legitimacy of liberation theology by conservatives in the Church through which liberation theology has not regained its former stature.

In the early 1980s Cardinal Ratzinger embarked on a series of public denunciations. While he attempted to battle liberation theology on theological grounds it is more likely his real concern rested with the loss of Vatican power caused by what he perceived to be a schismatic Church in the making fuelled by the marxist tendencies he saw permeating liberation theology's method and theory. His concerns prompted him to write the Peruvian bishops in 1983 requesting that they condemn the writings of Gutiérrez. The Peruvian bishops were divided in their assessment of Gutiérrez's work and therefore unable to grant Ratzinger his request. Although knowing his work was under scrutiny prompted Gutiérrez to begin the process of reviewing his writings should he be called on to account for them in a formal hearing in Rome. The review ultimately altered some of the principal mandates that drove liberation theology's very commitment to emancipation as the right wing of the Church grew increasingly influential and powerful. Interestingly,

72 Lernoux, p. 92.

Gutiérrez never suffered a formal reprimand from the Vatican unlike Leonardo Boff, the Brazilian liberation theologian who found himself officially silenced by the Vatican. However through this process Gutiérrez's work had lost its forceful social and political critique.

Ratzinger's investigation was fed by the accounts of conservative Latin American bishops unhappy with how liberation theology had challenged traditional forms of theological development and subsequently Church authority. Eventually Ratzinger responded to these complaints with the sequential publication of two Instructions diagramming the errors of liberation theology. The first describes the "unorthodoxies of liberation theology." In the words of Penny Lernoux, this first publication was "a caricature of that theology, revealing the prejudices of a middle-class German obsessed by communism...." The Instruction was a call to reject Vatican II's plea to view the Church as situated within society. Instead, Ratzinger called for a return to the times when the Church and State functioned in separate realms. The outcry provoked by this first Instruction led the cardinal to rewrite the document on the urging of John Paul II. Gutiérrez claimed victory but others were quick to point out that the second Instruction

74 Boff openly criticized the institutional church and its hierarchical practices and structures particularly in his book Church: Charism and Power (New York: Crossroad, 1985). Gutiérrez did not render the institution the same sort of analysis or critique which may in part be why he did not suffer the parallel disciplinary actions.


76 Lernoux, p. 102.

77 Ibid, p. 102.
was merely "a rephrasing of the first in more subtle language." 78

In recent years the Vatican has taken hold for its own purposes some of the tenets found in liberation theology and assimilated it into its "Theology of Culture." 79 This theology is at its core a rejection of modernity, a rejection that first emerged in the writings of theologians from France, Italy and Spain and then most apparently in the discourse of conservative bishops at Puebla. 80 The Vatican presumes the incapacity of society to rescue itself from moral destitution leaving it the self-proclaimed instrument for determining moral standards for all areas of social interaction. Much of the Vatican's issuances are problematic, but the distortion in their content rests in the way the Vatican appears to lift statements of liberatory intent without including the social analysis that makes those statements relevant or the solutions viable in pragmatic terms. The Church never shifts in its own hold on non-democratic principles and practices that would come about only if the Church turned the critique inward on itself.81 A critique of this sort would be possible only if the institution admitted it were a fully human run and constructed organization. Papal encyclicals confuse the emancipatory intent embodied in them by continuing to justify a hierarchical and exclusive structure dictating the moral and actual lives of parishioners in what appears to be a concerted effort to bring parishes throughout Latin America under the Vatican's direct control.

78 p. 104.
79 Pena, pp. 149ff.
81 Ghio, p. 195.
José María Ghio clarifies the current policy of the papacy by stating that its intent is not to embark on a path of restoration that would see it being a party within civil society. Rather, it is reworking elements to create an innovative role for itself through the "penetration of public institutions on the cultural, economic and social levels."82 The Vatican understands religion to be the essential component that bonds all human activity together under the auspices of what the institution calls culture. With this meaning of culture in mind, the institutional Church believes that "society and its laws should reflect Church teaching in every respect."83 The implication of this form of authoritarian thinking demonstrates the difficulty feminists or women in general have in developing their own programs to suit their lives within the institution. The proof for the need of the church to penetrate every aspect of society lies, according to the Church, in the brutalities for which the twentieth century will be marked by history. The solution is to imbue society with the morals that will withstand political and economic failures. As James Gustafson contends, the Catholic hierarchy is very specific in how it outlines morality eliminating the possibility of confusion of meaning in its directives.84

The dramatic shifts experienced by the institutional Church were juxtaposed in the political scene where brutal military governments gave way in the 1980s to fledging democracies in Brazil, Peru, Argentina and eventually Chile, again influencing how liberation theology would find or not

82 Ghio, p. 191.

83 Lernoux, p. 84.

find root in this new climate of apparent openness. Initially, these negotiated transitions were not met with euphoric responses from the populace who continued to wait and see how this new political system might alter the conditions under which they were living. Guillermo O'Donnell writes,

There is great dissatisfaction among many who enthusiastically welcomed the end of the authoritarian regimes; the democratic forces seem at times to weary or to lose their way. Authoritarian governments in Chile, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, and El Salvador had made the work of liberation theologians rather simple in that the enemy was glaringly apparent. They had little time or indeed ideological inclination to deal with the seemingly more insignificant dilemmas that rest in problems of gender or even race. Even so, without military governments in place, liberation theologians were forced to assess the immensely more complex issue of poverty that eludes identification with a singular or collective human agent or with clear political alternatives. What theologians did not understand or even realize at this juncture was the extent to which gender and race played into the solidifying of class structures. During the reign of authoritarian governments survival meant more than the problems of poverty. It required dodging death squads and the bullets of state soldiers who, with state approval, could close any meeting of individuals deemed a risk to national security using unfettered violence. Under such a system of institutionalized fear, the task of liberation theologians was one of organizing campaigns to

---

85 Although these countries began the process of institutionalizing democracies, many still had to deal with violence. Peru, as an example, during the 1980s struggled with an ever increasingly violent Sendero Luminoso, as well as continuing military abuses.

denounce the injustices and claim a more compassionate society as a right of citizens
disenfranchised by the current system.87

Ideologies were clearly defined as were political sides allowing liberation theologians an entry
to develop a discourse that mirrored the clarity of their vision. The transition eliminated the
clarity meaning the enemy, the causes and the solutions are no longer so easily demarcated. The
political system is more interactive and competitive from a greater variety of groups, classes and
interests. Poverty, not perhaps ignored but considered a condition of an ineffective political and
economic system during authoritarian periods, has found discursive centrality with varying
assessments of progress or nonprogress. The question that needs to be asked is if the rising levels
of economic disparity may in fact have decreased citizens' commitment to democratic processes
although the weariness generated during national security governments is undoubtedly a factor in
the continued presence of democracies. "Democracy survives," as Scott Mainwaring suggests,
"not so much because of its own achievements as because of the seeming exhaustion of
alternatives."88

The longevity of power and influence held in the partnership of the Latin American military
and their civilian counterparts has led to a slow incorporation of democratic practices.
Consolidating democracy, according to Guillermo O'Donnell, has been a tedious procedure
particularly in the case of Brazil that remained in a transitional state for eleven years.89

87 Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador filled his Sunday homilies with lists of human
rights violations.

88 Scott Mainwaring, "Transitions to Democracy and Democratic Consolidation: Theoretical
and Comparative Issues," in Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American
Democracies in Comparative Perspective. Edited by Scott Mainwaring, Guillermo O'Donnell and
Stabilization slowly appeared within social and economic institutions before moving into the more dispersed arena of culture itself. It is here, in the sphere of community interactions that the success of democracy can be measured.° Commitment to democracy by its citizens is mediated through their memories of brutal dictatorships and the degree of economic advancement occurring in peace times. In this process of securing democratic commitment from its citizens, comes the currying of favour with promises of justice and equality to follow.° The possibilities for women under democracy are significant at a political level of mobilization but not necessarily easily, if the culture and major institutions continue to issue opinions that contain women to a particular image of mothering.

The task of liberation theology in democratic times has been harder in terms of knowing how to produce tangible results as well as knowing precisely what its role should be in a widely scattered political environment. Theologians seem not to have taken up the call of democracy itself by instilling in people, through democratic practices within CEBS, the methods and means for the actual establishment of democracy. So while many Latin American countries were struggling to embolden themselves with a politic based on the participation of the populace, the institutional Church was going through another form of transformation that meant securing its hierarchy, forcing so called dissident tendencies back into its fold by limiting activities to ones

---

89 O'Donnell, p. 28.
90 Mainwaring, p. 296.
91 ibid, p. 298.
approved by the institution. In all this confusion Berryman writes the Church does not "reach the masses" and "liberationists feel lost because they are separated from the [people]. Their rhetoric separates them."93

The problem with historical reviews of liberation theology is that they tend to elude the intricate developments that followed the 1970s and even more importantly post 1980 as military governments gave way to democracies, and the Vatican embarked on a procedure that led to challenges against the work of a number of leading proponents of liberation theology. This later period is significant in that as political realms become more attuned to the intricacies of their contesting constituencies, liberation theologians narrow the parameters of analytical breadth. The failure by scholars to note the shift has allowed liberation theology to escape serious scrutiny and therefore reworking. While the international community was quick to support Gustavo Gutiérrez and Leonardo Boff when the Vatican began to question the legitimacy of their theologies, such aid was aimed principally at demonstrating how liberation theology in fact conformed to orthodox teachings and methods while fending off reports that liberation theologians had supported such contentious elements as the use of marxist theory.94 While this defence was logical in light of how Ratzinger had misconstrued some of liberation theology's main tenets, the confrontation did little

---


93 Berryman, p. 131.

to sustain the core of liberation theology that would allow it to move toward yet a greater critical stance that might force change internally in the institution.

From its inception, liberation theology assessed its value through its commitment to the poor. It sought to understand poverty in terms of its connections to political, social and economic structures, systems and ideologies in addition to religion. Through this analysis theologians claimed they altered theology in order to respond and reflect the realities of those living in poverty. In Gutiérrez's early work beginning particularly in the late 1960s, the pressures of living in poverty are acutely described, and importantly denounced but not shaped in ways that would illuminate the differing conditions for women and men. Political and social conditions configured the core and intent of his work until the mid 1980s when his publications begin to lose what might be called his commitment to seeking liberatory perspectives from those experiencing the pressures of poverty.95 Perhaps the most dramatic example of this shift is found in the two versions now available of his seminal work *A Theology of Liberation*.

The second edition of *A Theology of Liberation*, celebrating fifteen years since its first appearance, contains a new introduction and extensive revisions on its chapter dealing with marxist theory. This new edition follows on the heels of Gutiérrez's personal difficulties with the Vatican that he sees not so much as difficulties but the opportunity to revise ideas not matured in

---

95 I see liberatory responses rooted in social and political opposition as distinct from his turn to spiritual matters. He claims that his book *We Drink From Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994) is in fact a continuation of drawing on the knowledge of the people he serves. I would contend that it is a narrowing and refashioning of their knowledge to categories more conducive to Vatican approval without political and social accountability.
their original form.\textsuperscript{96} For the purpose of this study, the emphasis of key concern is on this shift particularly in how it affects the potentiality of liberation in concrete terms for women and men who wish to continue to serve their Church. And yet this new seasoned liberation theology lacks the depth and attachment to the world the earlier less matured liberation theology so ardently attempted to promote although with admittedly (as the following chapters intend to demonstrate) varying degrees of success. The dilemma underlying this discussion on Gutiérrez who has led the development of liberation theology since its inception at Medellin is to understand the reasons behind and the implications of what appears to be a retreat. Juan Luis Segundo, the Uruguayan liberation theologian, said the goal of liberation theology was "to remake, to the extent of our possibilities, the whole of theology."\textsuperscript{97}

Religion, Daniel Levine argues, holds the potential to serve as a catalyst for social change.\textsuperscript{98} It is possible for religion to act as impetus for social transformation but in liberation theology's current form the hope is both utopian and evasive omitting the complexity and diversity of social movements motivated by religious values and Church support and the multitude of conditions that must be present among people and in institutions before such change is apt to occur. While many factors are missed when assuming such wide potential for religion, one in particular stands out.

\textsuperscript{96} It would be interesting to compare the experiences of Leonardo Boff and Gustavo Gutiérrez with the Congregation of Sacred Doctrine and their subsequent reactions to these experiences. Boff continued to critique the institution, undergoing further threats, a year of enforced silencing and then his eventual resignation.

\textsuperscript{97} Marsha Hewitt, \textit{From Theology to Social Theory: Juan Luis Segundo and the Theology of Liberation} (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 132.

How can social change be solidified internally in individuals, and broadening out into culture and then into the institutions that govern when those religious values and methods of articulation are funneled through an institution with perplexing attitudes on political engagement and emancipation itself. Too often, it seems social reform falls prey to the changeability of political and religious candidates.
Chapter Two

Liberation: Shifting Ideas in the Work of Gustavo Gutiérrez

In the early 1970s liberation seemed to embody a universal meaning even without articulating the details of injustice or the political and social particulars of liberation. Those participating in social movements knew they were the agents of change against a visible political opponent. The term liberation seemed to inspire impassioned commitment by those battling to transform social and political conditions. Liberation became the locus on which individuals could commit to a movement that carried with it a deep sense of moral integrity against the vulgarities of a state seemingly intent on destroying any loyalty to national goals. Liberation seemed to mark both a utopian future, although, one within reach of those struggling for its realization and an awareness of the profound injustices that made liberation so necessary. Now nearly three decades later liberation seems bereft of its former vigour. To demand liberation while within the context of a democratic society seems a little too radical; a little too out of step with current language shifts. In political terms, liberation eludes precise definition often being accused of representing the desires of special interest groups who fail to consider broader democratic values by ruling political elites. For liberation theology and the theologians who committed themselves to the transformation of theology parallel problems have emerged. What liberation means in political terms for the benefit of whom and from what conditions is obscured by the pressures of altered contexts. The failure to explain these comes from inherent problems recognizable from the beginning in liberation theology and growing with time through the work of such prominent figures in the field like Gustavo Gutiérrez. If liberation theology sought, as Juan Luis Segundo has suggested, to develop "a new way of exploring the political content of faith and the risky
commitment [that] entailed it was asking for a major rethinking on the purpose and roles of all theology, the aims of the Church and the responsibility of establishing a critical connection between theology and political action.¹ From the beginning liberation theologians had a defined political intent that called for expansive changes exceeding the mere parameters of introducing a new theology. They set about revolutionaryizing the institutional Church and its mode of operation so as to make it accountable for its complicity in the maintenance of hegemonic powers. Beyond this inward gaze, liberation theologians pointed to the world of poverty that surrounded them and the need to account politically and theologically for this disparity. In present times, the subordination of a social and political liberation of society that would include the Church seems lost in an unspecified form of liberation. Revolutionary talk has been replaced with critiques meant to render less contentious the polarization of the early 1970s and with an emphasis on spirituality that evades a critique that would confront the types of oppression people face because of their gender and colour.² Gutiérrez has said that sin is the absence of love.³ His definition avoids addressing several central difficulties. The first is the unjust treatment of others that is often predicated on the lack of knowledge and will to change by individuals and institutions. For love to be efficacious in terms of working toward liberation it must be better defined to include a forceful attention to the variations of oppression and their elimination in order to fulfil the

---


requirements of Gutiérrez's own aim of liberation. Liberation must be exacting in its revealing of oppression so that all individuals might be included in the process and not just a few who happen to fit the mouldings of the broader definition. The loss of critique that could strengthen liberation theology's relevance for society strikes at the very heart of what identified liberation theology as simultaneously threatening to some and promising to others. The edge found in a commitment to critique that led liberation theologians into examining the nature of oppression is absent even as millions of Latin Americans continue to confront the difficulties of etching out a decent human existence. The question this chapter seeks to answer, at least in part, is what might be intrinsic in liberation theology's development that could explain the loss of independent critique and political action. Undergirding this preoccupation, rests the quandary of whether liberation theologians have engaged in a thorough enough critique of their own positioning to understand the implications of this retreat to those they continue to service who live the injustices that gender subordination brings them. For answers to these questions the primary works of "the guru of liberation theology" Gustavo Gutiérrez are examined for their gaps and alterations that affect how the particularities of oppression are missed. Here the point is to uncover and emphasize those worthy emancipatory elements found in Gutiérrez's work in order to juxtapose them against the large thematic features now missing. In the following chapters the details of these omissions are addressed in how they affected Christian Base Communities (CEBS) and feminist theology.

In the 1960s and 1970s when national security governments violently polarized much of Latin

---

4 Gutiérrez, p. 105

5 Elsa Tamez, Against Machismo. Interviews (Oak Park, ILL.: Meyer-Stone, 1987). Elsa Tamez, herself a protestant liberation theologian, describes Gutiérrez as the "guru" of liberation theology.
America, liberation was better conceptualized. Arriving at a consensus that massacres, detention and torture were all injustices from which people required release were facile resolutions.\(^6\) The problem is in insisting that liberation continues to be a constructive theme when democracy is being consolidated to replace the regimes that once terrorized the populace. The enemy is no longer obvious and the blame for continued poverty less comfortably thrust on a government elected by the people. The situation is further complicated by the rise in contesting actors for whom liberation finds variant forms resulting from oppression's unique manifestation in their lives. And, as economic status interfaces with race and gender, oppression's countenance is altered requiring different responses from those seeking emancipation. The confusion brought on by the last decade of democracy building and an institutional Church intent on reestablishing its authority globally has left liberation theologians the politically tenuous responsibility of finding new theoretical and practical expressions for enacting liberatory aims. This mediation of theoretical positions is the result of divisive pressures from current policies in the Church and society as a whole. The task liberation theologians assigned themselves in the beginning was not so radically different from theologians before them. They read where disruptions (in failures to love translated as injustices) between theology and society existed and strove to draw the two closer to bring deepened meaning and hope to people's lives. In these times with a dispersed political landscape, the contents of liberation are moved from political and social definitions to ones where theological perspectives dominate and the human dimension of lives is without critical

---

ties. Liberation has less to do with altering political systems or policies and more emphasis on finding some internal or spiritual liberation while waiting for the eschatological future to reveal itself. Revealed truth in the current context of Gutiérrez's work comes not from a historical examination of the world but from God who is discerned through the pastors and priests of the Church. Praxis in this paradigm no longer holds primacy in either the interpreting of biblical sources or the securing of theological relevance. Rather, the acting on history by human beings is subordinated to the ultimacy of God's own intervention to bring about final salvation. In practical terms this subtle shift away from the importance of human acts is also a return to a passivity that perhaps unconsciously expects those suffering from oppression to hope for this final act on the world by God instead of forcing the historical transformation of those same conditions.

For Gustavo Gutiérrez political and institutional pressures undoubtedly have influenced his reworking of the primary categories of liberation ending in the dilution of some key elements and the strengthening of others. The task here is to clarify what those changes are and their effect on real communities of people working for emancipatory change from within the Church. This investigation takes up the call or responsibility liberation theologians first assigned themselves, that is an internal critique to ensuring the effectiveness of the theology in its struggle to eliminate all forms of domination whether internally in the Church or externally in society itself. Theirs was a thrust as Leonardo Boff said to avoid the discrepancy between theory and practice so commonly

---

7 A good example of this shift to spirituality without concrete commitment or examination of the political and social realms is Gustavo Gutiérrez's publication We Drink From Our own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984).

found in the Church that resulted in misrepresentations of reality itself.⁹

Liberation theology's original assertion of the primacy of self-reflexive critique follows in the tradition of critical social theorists like Max Horkheimer, who wrote, "That all our thoughts, true and false, depend on conditions that can change..."¹⁰ The legitimacy of truth as he articulated it is limited solely by the constraints of available knowledge on thinking at any one period and how knowledge is used to maintain or eliminate suffering. Horkheimer understood the power of how knowledge functions to establish the ordering of lives based on class position in society. For instance, in terms of the Catholic Church knowledge can be allotted the status of absolute truth allowing those truths to stand as the standards for all of society to adopt and model itself after. Thus the purpose of a self-reflexive critique is to guard against the infiltration of domination into the contents and practices of emancipatory theory.

Gutiérrez initiated his liberatory theme by demanding that theology alter its methodological course by employing first and predominantly theories that sought to reveal the complex interlacing of social, political and economic systems on the lives of the poor in Latin America. His conception of how theology is formulated and its purposes did not reside in an universalist discourse strictly mediated through the institutional Church's pedagogical imperatives. Rather, he sought to reveal how the Church had abetted the process of alienation through its complicity with ruling powers in Latin America. The attention paid to denouncing institutional domination had the effect of redirecting the blame from victims of systemic oppression while synchronously

---

⁹ Leonardo Boff, Charism p. 33.

impelling a political response from those who were encouraged to claim their position as empowered citizens. The dual component of liberation theology's method allowed people often treated as ignorant by elites to know their value as human beings. The aim was to create a theology of value for those kept from the centres of power whether it be in the political realm or the Church itself while concurrently providing a basis on which to mount an organized struggle for the elimination of those elements that marked people as unworthy of social and political justice. In the original A Theology of Liberation first published in Spanish in 1971, Gutiérrez stated,

If the historical and social coordinates of the Christian community are not taken into account, any reflection will not be critical or sound and will serve only to preserve the status quo and justify attitudes which evade society. The objective, therefore, embedded in the formation of theological statements was one of critical analysis of social conditions to expose the repressive features of society that maintained vastly unjust asymmetrical relations. The disclosure of oppressive features of structures was to begin, so to speak, at home with the institutional Church.

There is an urgent need for Christians to involve themselves in the work of liberating this oppressed continent, by establishing real solidarity with the oppressed persons who are the chief victims. The first step is for the church as a

11 I would suggest that in The Truth Shall Make You Free, Gutiérrez re-entrenches the separation between himself as he aligns himself closer to the Church and those he calls "nonpersons" or the "poor" whose needs, hopes, etc., he purportedly represents. The label itself diminishes the diversity of lives found among those understood simply as the "poor." "Nonpersons" reduces the poor to passivity neglecting how as individuals and in communities they have contested their very real political, social and economic marginalization. (See The Truth Shall Make You Free pp. 23-24). Gutiérrez reduces and consequently mystifies the identities of oppressed people, calling on them to contest while leaving those in control of power exempt from change. (p. 55.).

whole to break its many ties with the present order, ties that it has maintained overtly or covertly, wittingly or unwittingly, up to now. This will not be an easy task, for it will mean abandoning outworn traditions, suspicions, viewpoints, advantages, and privileges, as well as the forces of inertia. ... It will mean incurring the wrath of the groups in power—with all the risks that entails.¹³

In political terms, Gutiérrez's writings threatened the ideological apparatuses of military governments in their disclosure of injustice and called for redress by social movements. As for the Church, critical statements that acknowledged the Church's complicity in the manufacturing of ideologies used to repress people and the growth of Christian Base Communities with liberation as the central locus caused division among the hierarchy that grew increasingly fearful of the possibility of schisms and revolutionary action.

In these initial years, Gutiérrez held that traditional theology functioned to serve the interests of a small but powerful elite that in turn controlled the political and economic features of society to the ideological and practical disadvantage of the vast majority. His response was to convert the practice of theology by imbuing it with a critical social consciousness. The outcome, if adopted, suggested the transformation of theologians, theology and their connection to the people both were meant to serve.

A better awareness of the harsh realities in Latin America goes hand in hand with a clearer realization that the church's structures are inadequate for the world in which it lives. They show up as outdated and lacking in vitality when confronted with new questions, and in one way or another seem to be tied up with the unjust order we wish to eradicate.¹⁴

For Gutiérrez, unquestionably the moment had arrived for professionals in his field to assume responsibility for their biases and admit how theology had functioned to create an oppressed


¹⁴ The Power of the Poor, p. 30.
underclass. What he proposed, was potentially a stunning revamping of theology, in effect removing sole proprietorship of theology from the hierarchy and placing it among the least franchised. Academics would have to learn that their hermeneutical expertise was of no more potential relevance than that of the *campesino* in the highlands of Peru, who, in this process would transform theological meaning by drawing on their life histories. While not as concisely or critically formed as the ideas of Gayatri Spivak, Gutiérrez was hedging on the notion in his early work that critical practice is essential to avoiding the insertion of "unrecognized totalizing impulses" that lead to the practice of "privileging one's own disciplinary practice."

Built into the early methodology of liberation theology was the potential for analyzing the specifics of oppression that extend from political units into language, behaviour and social ideologies found in the exercise of class, race and gender designations. More than this, these insights built on historical processes were to influence how theology was to develop in these communities and in the Church itself.

The means for attaining emancipation envisioned by Gutiérrez were premised on the active mobilization of people caught in systems of poverty. The emphasis on their politicization placed the responsibility for changing these conditions on their shoulders first and foremost and the state later in its response to social protest. While the responsibility could be measured for its own injustice, it shifted people from viewing themselves as victims to seeing themselves as full citizens capable of conjuring new modes of operation for society. In forming Christian Base Communities

---

15 *Campesino* means peasant. It holds levels of derogatory implications including being a simple farmer, uneducated, vulgar and certainly not versed in the finer ways of urban living.

the intention of liberation theologians was to provide participants with the skills to discern how oppression worked through political, economic and social systems and structures to diminish their worth. In conjunction to the political process of CEB practices, Gutiérrez emboldened his method with divine justification affirming the presence of a god deeply distressed and in opposition to the injustices participants articulated. From this method of combining biblical hermeneutics with social consciousness, Gutiérrez's hope rested in individuals' acquisition of the self-confidence that would impel them to contest injustices in the larger secular dimension of society. Liberation theology became an evangelizing movement aimed not specifically at drawing in non-Catholics although undoubtedly this was also a consideration, but by contesting injustice, renewing a Christian Catholic spirit lost in centuries of bland and authoritarian rule.

**Gustavo Gutiérrez: Major Themes and Shifts in his Thinking**

In its anniversary edition, *A Theology of Liberation* is in many consequential ways a different text. A new introduction tempers the emphasis on class analysis and reestablishes the centrality of the magisterium in validating theological discourse. A reworked chapter eliminates any intonations of marxist theory by replacing for language deemed too reminiscent of communism or class conflict.\(^{18}\) Phrases such as "labourers and entrepreneurs" that correspond to the language

\(^{17}\) Nearly a hundred years of official Catholic Social Doctrine had put the onus for change on the rich. Liberation theology's emphasis on the poor changing the conditions of their own lives was a significant shift.

\(^{18}\) In *The Truth Shall Make You Free* Gutiérrez defends his retreat from the social sciences and the use of Marxism by using the words of Karl Marx himself to suggest that even Marx was not primarily concerned with class (that Marx had admitted he had not created the term in a letter he had written -- although this does not prove Gutiérrez's stance that Marx was not concerned with class). (See p. 71 in above text). In doing this Gutiérrez lessens the stress on class and therefore
Pope John Paul II adopts in his writings and speeches, stand out as compromises to a Vatican rigorously opposed to marxist theory.¹⁹

His additions include brief but important references in the new introduction to this text to the oppression of women and people of colour elements that were missed in the original document. Here he recognizes that oppression exists in broad institutional strokes in society but also in ways that are specific to women and people of colour. His reference to gender and race calls attention to the necessity to deconstruct the mechanisms of oppression in all its forms.²⁰ The problem, however, is that while gender and race as categories are raised and given validity as important categories in exposing apparatuses maintaining oppression, they are not inserted elsewhere in his revised publications or for that matter in his other more recent works. Instead he leaves the work of race and gender analysis to those he designates as most affected by them. The problem of not incorporating gender and race analysis into his own work is two fold. First, it rests in the uncritical return to obedience to the magisterium's authority that has failed in both of these areas to account for the real social, political and economic oppression suffered by women and people of colour. The analytical disconnection from social contexts allows for the reinstating of people who are oppressed as abstract categories. Their oppressed conditions are seen as subordinate adjuncts to social misdemeanours but not central to the principal categories of oppression. Secondly, in


²⁰ ibid, p. xx.
failing to see how gender and race are implicitly interlaced into oppression Gutiérrez fails to emancipate his own work.

With the withdrawal of any language hinting at marxist theory, Gutiérrez seems to have emptied his work of serious attention to classism. Deborah A. King writes that the complexity of oppression, and its varied victims who are often substantially different from one another demand an analysis that recognizes the interconnectedness of race, gender and economics.21 Theologies dealing with the oppression and emancipation of peoples are inadequate when they address only one category or no particular category in depth thus eliminating a major component of how oppression is constructed and maintained among distinctive groups. Broad, universalizing statements on the injustices found in the world work to the advantage of the institution, preserving its status as the moral arbitrator. Joseph Comblin once said, "If we try to turn theology into the very language of divine revelation then we are simply establishing and justifying the privileges of an elite class of clerical mandarins and scribes."22

Gutiérrez's reasoning to leave gender and race analysis to those most affected by them is only partially sound. He accurately acknowledges that those in positions of authority have constructed the realities of others not given access to speak for themselves. Appropriation of voice is a very important issue, one that he himself has not dealt with in his own work including those publications apparently (but not visibly clear) based on the testimonies of lay people.23 In similar


23 Here I am referring to his book We Drink From Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People.
fashion he claims that Latin Americans have "suffered a great deal from interpretations imposed from outside our real situation" without attuning himself to the contradiction of this statement in his closer merging with the teachings of the Church that speak for all peoples regardless of what women as a diverse group, as an example, may say for themselves about their lives or belief systems.24 On the other side of this issue of appropriation the complexity of issues of access to authority and political change demand attention. This omission appears to be an aspect of his lack of self-reflexive critique that might have articulated the value in individuals, much like himself, who hold if not some authority, access to authorities to benefit those who are obstructed from power structures as they (elites like Gutiérrez) grow to understand their own part in the processes of sustaining oppression. It is these people who can sometimes more convincingly open opportunities for change. Gutiérrez's work too often emphasizes the need for the poor to transform themselves and not the responsibility of those in positions of power to do likewise. Gutiérrez explains his changes to the original text of A Theology of Liberation by claiming that he has "moved forward."25 Nevertheless the phrase "moving forward" holds within it some serious questions of privileging types of knowledge and their attachments to various institutions not known for their democratic practices. At the base of this statement and the work he now does is the sidestepping of a type of self-critique that would question his connections to the Church and his own position as a world renowned liberation theologian. Joseph Comblin, in those early years of liberation theology when critique seemed to abide by few intellectual restraints said, "Theologians must eat before doing theology. They see the world through the eyes of those who

24 The Truth Shall Make You Free, p. 51.

guarantee them their daily bread."\textsuperscript{26} My quoting of Comblin at this juncture is not to suggest that Gutiérrez has become, as I quoted Comblin saying earlier a "mandarin" to Church authority, rather that his current work begs for an approach that explains its direction more soundly. As Gayatri Spivak says of her own work, self-critique is a constant measurement against the privileging of positions and their deployment as absolutes.\textsuperscript{27}

The original text of \textit{A Theology of Liberation} held for a radical reworking of theology, Church and society. By attuning the methodology of liberation theology to the requirements of participants' lives and leaving enough flexibility for development and individual reworking within it, the theology, according to the younger Gutiérrez, would help to increase the emancipatory potential of the community. Robert McAfee Brown used the word "radical" to describe this early methodological impulse in Gutiérrez's work as emblematic of the need to reveal the very "roots" of oppression and the potential for liberation.\textsuperscript{28}

The distinguishing feature of liberation theology in its early days stood in its capacity to engage with the world. Evaluating its success meant evaluating its effectiveness in the \textit{barrios} and shanty towns of Latin America where people were moving from strictly traditional Bible groups to acts that resulted in potable water systems or soup kitchens in their localities. As Gutiérrez said in the first version of \textit{A Theology of Liberation}, theology is the "critical reflection

\textsuperscript{26} Comblin, p. 61.


\textsuperscript{28} Robert McAfee Brown, \textit{Gustavo Gutiérrez: An Introduction to Liberation Theology} p. 64.
on humankind, on basic human principles...."29 Traditionally, institutional statements on the conditions of the world have been often too tardy and too generalized to have practical effect on the lives of the poor. This Vatican custom of speaking after the fact and its thrust to centre theology on a transcendental God allowed Gutiérrez an opening through which to insert a theology that would remember the oppression of the past but evaluate it within its present forms through a god in solidarity with a suffering people.30 Vatican II had declared the significance of unifying Church statements to actual social conditions allowing theologians like Gutiérrez to test the Church on this new flexibility by drawing on a social analysis that put the culpability of oppression within the power structures. He saw and helped to create a new brigade of theologians who chose to live as "committed" Christians in the world.31 Reflection on the actual conditions of life was the pivot point from which theological statements found validity. God, for these early liberation theologians, could only be discerned in greater awareness through the experiences of people's lives.32 The reason Gutiérrez's original statements and methods of theological praxis are essential is their challenging of the magisterium's claim to be the final referee of legitimate theological and moral knowledge both of which were to hold imperial weight in deciding the content of Christian life. By inserting a hermeneutical method in groups that were


30 Donal Dorr, Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Catholic Social Teaching Revised Edition (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), pp. 150ff. What is also interesting is how elements such as Gutiérrez's emphasis on social analysis before commenting on poverty comes directly from "Gaudium et Spes" and Pope Paul VI's encyclical "Populorum Progressio."


32 A Theology of Liberation, Revised edition, p. xxxiv - xxv.
traditionally excluded from participating in theological discourse, notions of intellectual privilege were subverted.

Gutiérrez fought to eliminate the barriers to theological practice. He forced hermeneutics into settings where by convention people were directed to be its obedient recipients certainly not its creators. He was well aware of the implications of practices within the Church that had left the poor as marginal participants in an institution that devalued their contributions. Therefore his method was aimed at revitalizing religious expression by obliging it to speak directly to political and economic realities. In turn the method acted to imbue religion with a renewed integrity amongst its most populous adherents. In coercing openings where legitimate theological building could take place Gutiérrez implicitly challenged the Church's proprietorship over ideas and its partnership with those holding political and economic power. Undeniably, in asserting the right of the poor to read and interpret the Bible according to their lived experiences, Gutiérrez was confirming the Church's failure to render a meaningful relationship with the majority of its clients.

A Theology of Liberation was significant for its daring entrance into a critique of Church and society and its disavowal of the insignificance of Church responsibility to the world and the people it serves. It was daring because Gutiérrez would claim or rather demand that the poor be brought into the Church as active participants, indeed as full members of the Church capable of making important contributions to the contents of theology and how the Church ought to activate itself in the world against injustice. This work, perhaps for the first time in a theological treatise, called on the poor to assume a position of authority that would allow them to initiate theological and political theory and action in a way that was distinct from the institutional Church.
Pressures from the Institutional Church

The 1988 fifteenth anniversary edition of *A Theology of Liberation* reflects the portentous political and ideological shifts marked by two major events, first the ascension of Karl Wojtyla to the papacy and second, the CELAM conference in Puebla Mexico in 1979. Pope Paul VI, had generally extended his support of the aims contained in liberation theology thereby allowing liberation theologians scope to operate in difficult conditions. In 1979 Paul VI, in a personal audience with the Archbishop of San Salvador, El Salvador, Oscar Romero who in March of 1980 was assassinated in a right wing military operation, articulated the subtle and complex pressures under which liberation theologians worked.

I understand your difficult work. This type of work can be misunderstood and therefore needs much patience and much support. I know that many do not think as you do, and finding unanimity of thought is difficult considering the conditions of your country, but proceed with enthusiasm, with patience, with strength.

In contrast, Pope John Paul II set a new direction for the Church under his own powerful and magnetic leadership. In 1980, just prior to his death, Romero returned to the Vatican only to be admonished for his activities among the poor judged by John Paul II as too politically occupied. Possibly without even understanding the extent to which liberation theology would be under attack by this new administration, liberation theologians did enter the new decade of the 1980s battling for the survival of their theology's principal precepts and right to exist.

In 1983 and for the next few years, Gutiérrez found himself the direct target of the Vatican as he defended his published works against the accusations of Ratzinger who charged Gutiérrez with

---

"uncritical acceptance of a Marxist interpretation,' 'seductiveness' and 'extreme ambiguity.'”

Ratzinger, without accounting for the political implications of his own position accused Gutiérrez of wrongly inciting hope amongst a people unlikely to know justice. Such unattainable hope he argued would only augment the suffering. Ratzinger's attack misinterpreted Gutiérrez's use of biblical sources, charging him with choosing passages that best suited Gutiérrez's personal political motivations.

In 1984 the battle moved from letter writing to the issuance of the first of two official Instructions from the Sacred Congregation focusing not specifically on the work of Gutiérrez but on all of liberation theology. In this document, Ratzinger argues that liberation theology might result in "deviations" harmful "to the faith and to Christian living." Of primary concern was liberation theology's central concentration on the injustices of class. Any reference or analysis suggesting marxist theory implied a communism founded in atheism and violent revolution. In The Truth Shall Make You Free Gutiérrez distances himself from Marxist theory along a similar line of argument. The work, in fact appears to be a direct response to Ratzinger's problems with liberation theology through which Gutiérrez attempts to make amends to demonstrate the

---


35 McAfee Brown, p. 137. In the section dealing with Gutiérrez's defense for his Doctorate of Theology, recounted in The Truth Shall Make You Free, Jean Delorme, one of his examiners confirms that Gutiérrez's use of biblical citations in his work are "all correct." (p. 46). This addresses my contention that Gutiérrez's core theology was never particularly innovative nor responsive to critiques of oppression (re: gender and race) that arise in the work of feminist theologians.

36 ibid, p. 143.

37 p. 143.
orthodoxy of his work.\textsuperscript{38} World wide support for the defense of liberation theology quickly followed accusing Ratzinger of having done little to understand the use of marxist theory in the examination of disparity or the pressure under which liberation theologians worked and lived that demanded their participation in political activity so as to bring integrity to their own commitment.

The second Instruction in 1985 was to calm the outrage of responses that ensued with the publication of the first. This did not occur before the Peruvian episcopate was called to Rome for closed sessions ending in the bishops agreement to abide by the tenets of the first Instruction. They agreed that liberation theology contained some "deviations and distortions", that marxism was not appropriate and finally that the Church was concerned for "all who are miserable" and not just the poor as the phrase "the preferential option for the poor" that had been adopted at Puebla seemed to infer according to the Vatican.\textsuperscript{39} In their stead, the Vatican proposed what it labelled as an "authentic liberation" with a reaffirmation of the singular importance of the magisterium as the teaching unit.\textsuperscript{40} Whether or not the bishops knew at the time or perhaps were unconcerned with the implications of the Instruction, the Vatican was in essence stating that it held primacy in the determination of how liberation would look in a moral world of its own discernment. The bishops had agreed with Vatican complaints that some liberation theologians had delved too deeply into the social scientific study of inquiry again indicating that the Vatican would be the primary source of information and its legitimation.

Some of the changes found in Gutiérrez's work can be attributed to the intense pressure placed

\textsuperscript{38} The Truth Shall Make You Free, p. 71-72.

\textsuperscript{39} Brown, p. 145.

\textsuperscript{40} p. 145.
on him by Vatican sources as well as by those of his own Peruvian bishopric. Primarily is the shift away from the use of critique as a pivot on which to base his own methodology or that of liberation theology and, its discernment process in CEBS. Leonardo Boff had claimed that critique was the sustaining radical feature of liberation theology and now through Vatican pressure Gutiérrez was reducing his commitment to it. As such liberation theology loses its potential to reveal the layers of oppression in the world outside the Church, internally within the Church or in how as paid academics in the development of theology, the issue of power's relationship to identity and privilege are marked by the social and political subjectivity of the professional. This means that institutions, systems, and culture all escape concerted attention. In terms of theology, with critique no longer functioning at the level it once did the Bible returns to its status as a revelatory document as opposed to a document able to be read critically in light of present times by a laity actively involved in setting the tone for the Church. Revealed truth is once again conditioned through the authority of the institution. The Bible is reduced in its purposes rather than expanded. It no longer acts as a source for analysis; rather, it becomes a tool to justify the ideological leanings of the institution. Freedom is narrowed particularly in the arena of moral agency resulting in the imposition of guilt among those who fall outside of the magisterium's parameters of righteous action and response. Gutiérrez suggests that "truth and freedom must stand in a fruitful tension," and yet truth, in his calculation, is already processed through the institution diminishing the freedom to expand on what constitutes truth by "free" non-


42 The Truth Shall Make You Free, p. 98ff.
ordained individuals.\

Liberation theology, in its original guise seemed to perceive the costs of a theology exempt of social analysis in this the second of Gutiérrez's most fundamental losses. Disengagement from the employment of social analysis renders the theology disabled in its capacity to secure the meaning that gave it relevance in the past. In *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, he contends that the social sciences continue to play a part in understanding the conditions of oppression and domination although he distances himself from marxism and describes at length the problems of the social sciences. He never critiques theology, or the Church's own problems in articulating the social conditions of people's lives. In his revised edition of *A Theology of Liberation*, *The Truth Shall Make You Free* and *We Drink From our Own Wells*, he draws extensively on Vatican encyclicals and not on any notable arm of the social sciences that would imply some greater independence from Vatican thinking. The absence of a vigourous social analysis places liberation theology in amongst a category of ahistoricism again at the cost of silencing the voices of the community who used the memory of oppression to guide their political commitment as Christians. The problem is that while social analysis loses its central positioning in liberation theology's methodology, the theology does not continue to behave as a servant of the community. Instead it dons another ideological guise by presenting itself as a beacon for living as emancipated individuals within the general strictures of approval of the institution.

With the diminishment in value of critique and social analysis there remains little hope that Gutiérrez will engage the theories of feminist theologians who are attending to issues of

---

43 *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, p. 106.

44 ibid., pp. 53-80.
domination, race, gender, privilege, and subjectivity and how all are found not only in institutions, systems and culture but in the language that frames theology. Gutiérrez's current links with critique are so minimally deployed that his abundant references in such works as The God of Life to papal statements leave the theology disconnected to the complexity of human reality.

While insertion of papal documents is not new the volume and nearly exclusive use of them is and signals a radical shift in alliance. The original liberation theology understood the institutional Church was embedded in practices of domination at all levels of its operations and therefore maintained a form of respectful distance in terms of uncritically adhering to its analyses and interpretations.\(^45\) This seems to be ignored in order to use the phrases issued by the Pope that are enticingly seductive but lack a firm commitment to freedom of thought and practice. It also allows Gutiérrez to focus on housing, education and health issues rather than on the more structural causes of these inequalities.\(^46\) This may account for why CEBS appear to be more engaged in charitable deeds than in proposing political acts against systemic injustices.

In some ways the Vatican's response to liberation theology's early commitment to a critique of society is interesting in terms of some of the criticisms levelled against liberation theologians that submitted, contrary to Vatican worries, liberation theology actually lacked a substantive social analysis.\(^47\) Jurgen Moltmann, the German protestant theologian has commented that liberation

\(^45\) Before liberation theology had experienced the full weight of critique by the new papacy of John Paul II, Gutiérrez had in fact practised a public response, at the very least to the publications of bishops working on behalf of the Vatican. This is certainly the case with Gutiérrez's response to the preparatory document for Puebla in The Power of the Poor in History.

\(^46\) A Theology of Liberation, Revised edition, p. xxi.

\(^47\) Miguez Bonino, the Argentinean protestant liberation theologian who wrote Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation, was perhaps the best at using social analysis and as
theologians in fact "do not do much social analysis." Arthur McGovern agrees in part with Moltmann by describing liberation theologians' social analysis as one that captures the "macro" picture of conditions in Latin America. Although, he adds the task of liberation theologians is so multi-fold that one could hardly expect them to be current in all areas of the social sciences. McGovern dismisses the importance of the social sciences in the goals of liberation that theologians themselves have set and the responsibility this liberation holds to the people they serve. If, the theology itself is, as Alfredo Fierro says, basically conservative, then the social sciences remain the only progressive element in the process to maintain the relevance of the entire project. The potential for a more profound use of social analysis has existed in liberation theology from its beginnings, with the focus levelled on history and human need to alter its conditions as either, in Gutiérrez's thinking a working toward the kingdom or in Bonino's sense an imitation of God's kingdom. The primacy of both critique and praxis were the footholds on which social analysis might have emerged as a stronger tool in the development of liberation theology thereby creating a much more inclusive theology. But as Alistair Kee has written, "...Gutiérrez deliberately avoids addressing himself to the ontological critique, it is because he


McGovern, p. 163.


Schubeck, p. 208.
provided several occasions on which it would have been appropriate, but failed to take advantage of them.  

Although Gutiérrez did shift his theology in the 1970s from being merely a reform package for society to being one that called for revolution to rid social institutions and systems of all forms of domination. In this respect there was perhaps not so much social critique as a daring bravado cognizant of the immensity of changes and effort required to bring justice to Latin America. In surveying the conditions of the poor of Central and South America, the violence, the long histories of inequities, leftist revolution seemed the only reasonable recourse. At that time the negotiations that would result in nascent democracies appeared impossibly unrealistic against regimes adept in squashing all forms of social contestation. Social movements had risked life and freedom for aspiring to force the state to rework agrarian and labour policies. And Gutiérrez knew that domination had settled into the very fabric of society itself, ingrained at all levels in skewed visions of human worth suggesting an even more powerful reason for revolution. From Christians, as Gutiérrez wrote in *A Theology of Liberation*, he demanded "a more evangelical, more authentic, more concrete, and more efficacious commitment to liberation."  

Nevertheless with revolution the goal, sexism and racism throughout the 1970s continued to be ignored and little understood. Naively theologians believed that revolution would wipe out all forms of oppression. Little thought went into how oppression needed to be specified in order to attend deliberately to its end from within the practices of institutions but also from within personal relationships. Theologians neglected to question how their methods might be excluding others, or

---


imposing a new ideology that was accepted not critiqued and expanded. They never questioned in these early years that their theology and its methods were excluding a deeper debate on oppression that would allow women and people of colour to participate in the development of analysis. A nuanced theoretical conception of resistance was not part of liberation theology's mandate. The emphasis was on community or union and therefore unity in theory and practice. Little was said about contending impulses that strove to bring new insights to liberation theology or the possibilities for activism. Unitary action and thinking were considered the keys in both CEBS and social movements in order to do battle against military governments.

Marxist theory, contrary to Gutiérrez's assertions, did mark much of the early liberation theology's analysis of society. Marxism offered a significant depth to theologians' analysis of political and economic systems. It allowed them to see the divisions in class as the markers for disparity perpetuated by a persistent grab for more power and control over the means of production. With the fall of the Eastern bloc countries marxism, although understood by liberation theologians in its western semblance, also lost face with liberation theologians quick to divulge themselves of connections with it. Alistair Kee has said,

There is no lack of theologians who can match words and sometimes deeds with their Marxist partners, but whose theology is strangely unexamined. It is very often inherited pietism or unreconstructed dogma learnt in the seminary.\(^{54}\)

In the end it may have been theologians' lack of real commitment to view western marxism as an important vehicle through which much of the rudiments of domination could be disclosed. Ultimately its demise was linked not to its value as a tool of disclosure and analysis but to its links to political systems described as the embodiment of evil that had run their course. Marxism

permitted a more detailed examination of society external to the usual development type theories that precipitated liberation theology. Marxism offered a theory that could accommodate the intricacies of oppression specific to the Latin American continent. In the end however, liberation has been stymied not only by exempting analysis of social structures that clarifies reality but by placing greater weight on the end of history and the establishment of God's kingdom. With this shift the primacy of human agency in exacting change from repressive governments is diminished placing the emphasis on God's ultimate power in deciding the shape and time when true liberation will manifest itself.

Some liberation theologians like Gutiérrez have argued that marxist theory is too constraining to assess the multifariousness of oppression. They have not however substituted marxism with another theory able to do likewise leaving their work adrift amidst an unclaimed ahistoricism. As though in reply to liberation theologians Pamela Brubaker believes that marxist theory is the only economically based theory that can account for oppression as oppression rooted in a sociohistorical context. Furthermore she proposes that marxism can be expanded by the insertion of feminism. In contrast, mainstream theories, particularly those dealing with economics, appear to be formulated as though economics could be determined by natural laws external to the pressures of political and social developments. In her view Harksock sees the idea of

---

55 Again McGovern would say that liberation theologians only employed parts of Marx's theory and certainly no evident political program. He would also add that Gutiérrez's analysis could hardly be called marxist when his social analysis was as broad as it was.(McGovern p. 163). Fierro contends that from the beginning Gutiérrez did in fact use marxism (Alistair Kee would agree) and that it had a significant impact on the way in which Gutiérrez set up his project that divided Latin Americans into the "exploited and the exploiters." He claims that Gutiérrez's use of José María Arguedas, Todas las sangres in A Theology of Liberation sets the tone for one that is precisely an analysis based on the insights of Marx. "...whether he [Gutiérrez] knows it or not, it is a Marxist and materialist theology." (Fierro, p. 385).
The rational economic man who inhabits the worlds of both classical and neoclassical economics and the exchange theories of sociology and anthropology [as] a radically truncated and incompletely creature, incapable of either honor or ferocity. To the extent that this flattened creature forms the basis of theories of human nature and action in general and of power relations in particular, the field of social inquiry has been greatly impoverished.  

In this respect, such theories evade the everyday life experiences of individuals instead positioning the emphasis on the erecting of theories of universal intent but painfully devoid of reality.

Brubaker admits the gaps in marxist theory that have failed to move class analysis into the areas of gender and race. Her solution has been not to dismiss marxist theory or to devalue its worth because of the failure to save so called socialist societies, but to expand its parameters asserting its continued worth in the deconstructive process of oppression. She proposes a more advanced marxist theory that brings gender and race into equal standing with class. In this theoretical construct, "capitalism and patriarchy [are] posited as dual systems that shape contemporary society."  

In marxism's stead Gutiérrez appears to forego an independent analysis for the statements issued through the papacy. The problem in this for liberation theology is complex. First is Gutiérrez's reliance on an analysis founded on a process and a discernment not of his own, based on a vision of society and the Church's position in it that many feminist theologians view as injurious to liberatory aims. Papal encyclicals, as an example, continue to reduce women's worth


58 Brubaker, p. 113.
to their biology. In "Mulieris Dignitatem" ("On the Dignity and Vocation of Women") John Paul II perpetuates stereotypical notions of women with the result of limiting their moral agency indeed "their ability to act as adult human beings."59 The Vatican, the bishops at Puebla and the bishops in the United States in their statement on the economy have all recognized the marginalization of women but fail as Brubaker says, to "move beyond these conceptions" limiting women's existence to that of motherhood.60 This biological capacity "to give birth" perseveres in forcing narrow definitions of who women are and what roles they may have in order to be validated as "good" women by society.61 The role of feminist critique is not to demean the lives of women who are concerned about issues connected to the well being of their families but to engage in a more examined treatment of women's lives and the ways in which coercive authority acts to obstruct women's participation in economic, social and political spheres under value judgements that assess the quality of their actions. The marginalization of women is recognized in liberation theology or commented on but the content of what feminist theory and theology have to offer is not integrated into the whole beyond attempts to eliminate exclusive language. Male priests and theologians continue not to understand their own complicity in the maintenance of exploitation as they persist in controlling and interpreting meaning for women.62 Gutiérrez does not account for the ideological biases that permeate materials intended for the laity or attempt to deconstruct them.


60 p. 104.

61 p. 104.

Liberation theologians did not enter the base communities empty-handed. They brought with them orthodox, even conservative, forms of Christian theology. That is to say: adopting the perspectives of the underside of history, liberation theology is a very radical revision of traditional orthodox theology, but it has never ceased to be just that.  

Theology "always serves certain interests and therefore has to reflect and critically evaluate its primary motives and allegiance." Gutiérrez's choice is to avoid the issues feminist theology raises by insisting that their work must remain their own. His refusal to take up feminist theology or to utilize its methods and themes simply feeds the interests of the status quo or the reigning interests of the institutional Church. "Theological textbooks and research, ecclesial commissions and studies and ever 'progressive' liberation and political theologies still ignore our [feminist] theological work." The attitude expressed by Gutiérrez functions to segregate women or push them into a separate and not fully legitimate corner of theology implying the relevance of their work is not extendable to the lives of men. Unfortunately Gutiérrez is enacting the very problem he and others in his field accused theologians before them of having done.

Liberation theologians claim that their own theological predecessors in the adaption of their intellectual techniques, have stopped unnecessarily short of the promise of their approach. Because of their distorted understanding of intellectual integrity, they have failed to fully criticize the entire domain of Christian thought and practice by refusing to move beyond biblical criticism to ecclesiastical and social criticism.

---


64 Alistair Kee, Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology, p. 179.

65 ibid, p. 67.

66 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship of Equals, p. 252.

67 Pottenger, p. 38.
His statements on oppression and liberation always lacked specificity but, in the past were able to preserve their historical roots. The emancipatory project in present times lacks the insight and nuanced quality that the insertion of self-critique on power would bring. Patriarchy must be understood as a "historical political system of interlocking dominations" in dire need of attention and dismantling for the emancipation of all of humanity.68

Gutiérrez's move away from an independent critique and social analysis opens the way for him to support the Catholic Church's thrust to assert obedience to its teaching authority throughout its parishes. While certainly the Church is filled with diversity in thought and practice within a certain expanse of its own directives, the Church does exercise its authority through the disciplining of its priests and religious thereby projecting a homogenous view of morality and agency. For liberation theology this shift disperses the political meaning of such terms as the "poor" that were useful in calling to attention the structural injustices that resulted in a class of people unable to secure economic and social stability. Its replacement with "all those who are miserable" holds no focus on the community responsibility of altering conditions that lead to a sector of society being marginalized.

The relationship between the institution and its theologians, in this case Gustavo Gutiérrez is a complex one as this chapter attempts to define. On the one hand, liberation theology was given credit for having brought people into more active service in the Church, on the other hand, it was accused of having divided it. If Gutiérrez had proceeded with his critical examination of theology and the Church perhaps eventually it might have led him to define the principal features of

---

Christianity in new terms. God, Jesus and Mary might have developed, with an analysis imbued with feminist input, into areas opposed to the definitions and practices of the institutional Church. The point is that this direction of maturation is a more logical choice in light of liberation theology's origins and development rather than the route that Gutiérrez took in the mid 1980s to confine his thinking and work more in accord with the mandates of the Vatican.⁶⁹

When liberation theology first emerged the Church was battling a marked decline in its membership coupled by a decrease in the number of young men choosing to enter the seminary. Liberation theology was an invigorating contrast to the staleness of the institutional Church. It was ideologically current with the times. It could ignite the religious fires of believers by including parishioners in services, in prayer group meetings, and in demonstrating real concern with concrete solutions to how projects might be initiated to bring relief to communities.⁷⁰ Priests claimed they came to be partners with the poor not to be party to structures of power. The intent was to elaborate a theology that interacted with the lives of people suffering from poverty by allowing priests, delegates of the word, religious and community people to engage in discussions and activities relevant to pressing political and economic concerns. Since that time, the Vatican has embarked on a campaign aimed at recovering a unified Church undivided in allegiance to the

---

⁶⁹ See examples of the stress to establish correct hermeneutical interpretation and exegesis in his defence for his doctor of theology in The Truth Shall Make You Free, pp. 1-52.

⁷⁰ Testimonial literature from this early period is interesting reading in light of the contrast of conservative priests with progressive ones. See as an example Don't Be Afraid Gringo/ A Honduran Woman Speaks From the Heart: The Story of Elvia Alvarado in which she details the importance of the Church in the development of a new political view and commitment but also how the Church can limit the growth of groups particularly those of women. Translated and Edited by Medea Benjamin (San Francisco: The Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1987).
teachings of the magisterium. In this campaign Churches are encouraged to work from the resources provided by the institution rather than exploring the materials available from secular sources.71

The term liberation came with a political intent which is where in part the Church centred its difficulty with liberation theology. Only as liberation lost its political focus and came to represent a more religious form of renewal for "all those who are miserable" did the Church shift its gaze to other contentious areas.72

In his early works, Gutiérrez's idea of liberation encompassed a vast elimination of coercive power injustices. Contrary to the Vatican's charges, Gutiérrez did not ignore the individual, or the need for individuals to undergo spiritual renewal. In the 1970s, such a process was called consciousness raising but embodied more than seeing the world in new terms, the process demanded individuals view themselves and their relationship to God under a new criteria of worth and connection. The focus was on establishing self-worth against all the social indicators that

71 This idea will be developed further in the chapter on CEBS. Further to this point see John Burdick's Looking For God in Brazil, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

72 I will take up this theme in more detail later in this chapter. For now I would say a dramatic example of the shift to spirituality and the reification of the poor is found in Gustavo Gutiérrez's We Drink From Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984). This book appears to be a direct response to the criticism by Ratzinger that liberation theology was so politically engaged that it had neglected the spiritual dimension of people's lives. Gutiérrez also seems to have forgotten as Jon Sobrino has stated that spirituality must be played out in the world of social activism if it is to have any meaning. He writes, "A theology isolated from the people of God -- or even worse, at odds with that people -- and feeding only on its own resources, will betray its irreality, however true its propositions." Jon Sobrino, Spirituality of Liberation: Toward a Political Holiness, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 76.
imposed a hierarchy of value predicated on class, gender and race. The liberation Gutiérrez envisioned was one measurable by individuals and fully rooted in the possibilities of human endeavour in present historical circumstances. The Bible acted as the source, confirming the need to struggle for justice while concurrently seeking God amongst the poor. Its use however, was limited in terms of the passages studied and, unlike feminist theological practices, was not critical of sources, another reason why his actual theology remained on course with Church teachings. Gutiérrez's conception and practice of emancipatory methods was channelled into creating a semblance of the kingdom promised by God in these present times. His intent was to raise contestation to a level of community involvement that would eventually end the rule of military governments. The theology itself, while God centred, was intended to be people centred, more particularly centred on the poor as it drew in a sector of society treated only peripherally in the past and at best only patronizingly in the Church's concentration on charity. Liberation for Gutiérrez, writing in the early 1970s, was a critical question in terms, as he says, "...about the very meaning of Christianity and the mission of the Church." These words mirror what Karl Rahner

---

73 Gutiérrez did not see how class analysis could not encompass the differences in gender or race without the help of feminist theory or theories of colour. Without these insertions his representations of women was submerged under the category of the universal suffering victim encapsulated in androcentric terms.

74 Perhaps better than any other liberatory priest at the time, Archbishop Oscar Romero could induce Salvadorans to join in whatever capacity they could the struggle against the oligarchy. He made political engagement not only a responsibility of the people but preferable mode of expressing one's commitment to God.

saw as theology's duty "to engage the entire church in self-criticism." So for Gutiérrez in these early years, the Church was not to be exempted from the processes of liberation but drawn into a new but critical reflection on its relationship with society.

This is the context in which Gutiérrez was writing and thinking in the late 1960s and most of the 1970s, this is also why some of his later works and indeed his revisions to the first edition of his pivotal work are so out of line with the original impulses of liberation theology. In these revisions, the very question of emancipation loses its connection to reality returning to an emancipation based on individualistic notions of liberation connected through one's personal conversion to God. In the new introduction to the revised edition of *A Theology of Liberation* Gutiérrez reaffirms his original definition of liberation as encompassing social and political dimensions but supplements this with an obtuse statement that restrains liberation theology to a "twofold fidelity" to the Christian faith and to the people of Latin America. The concern is how, in what he has posited as this potentially contradictory responsibility of liberation theology, can liberation evolve when the faith, its practice within the Church and human behaviour outside are dictated by a Church leadership that fails to allow for a freedom of critical thought by those working for liberation from within its structures. Eventually either obedience to the faith in the terms demanded by the institution or dedication to the people of Latin America as it was originally defined in liberation theology, will hold primacy. Notwithstanding in the case of Gutiérrez the

---

76 Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza quoting Rahner in *Discipleship of Equals* p. 254.

77 Fierro, 234. Fierro contends that social theory demonstrates that "there can be no transformation of human beings without a transformation of society." (Fierro, p. 235).

78 Gutiérrez, p. xviii.
centrality of obedience to the faith has been intricately but problematically interwoven into his commitment to the people of Latin America. Without self-critique, the allegiance demanded by the institution on one side and by the theology to the people of Latin America on the other, fails to challenge operating patterns that rest in patronizing practices based on who has greater authority to determine the content of the processes. For Gutiérrez, as his statement later in the same introduction would indicate, equal allegiance to the faith and to the people of Latin America is not a possibility when the magisterium is given superior authority to counsel believers on their "quest." 79 The difficulties of permitting the Church to hold moral and theological authority are demonstrated in the work of feminist theologians like Ada María Isasi-Díaz who contends that because the Church's analysis of gender, race and of injustices such as poverty is articulated within its own undisclosed sense of its authoritative position in society, the Church is ill equipped to represent (or define the parameters of their moral lives) those who are forced to make decisions of moral ambiguity due mostly to the historical conditions in which they live.

This means that the faithful must have essential, inner freedom, as well as effective, external freedom. The institutional church must not coerce anyone to act against conscience, and this means that each person must have 'immunity from external force compelling one to act against one's conscience, and the full possession of privilege, the faculty and freedom to perform these actions which conscience enjoins, without let [sic] or hindrance.' 80

The role Gutiérrez has given the magisterium is not one of counsel but one that admits his and those believers who are practising liberation theology subservience to the teachings of this


institutional organism. In practice, the magisterium supplies the content for theological reflection and practice, and in conjunction with the Sacred Congregation headed by Ratzinger, works to ensure the practice of the Christian faith is carried out within it parameters of meaning. In contrast, liberation theology began its course by functioning on the principle that participants in Christian Base Communities could engage in their own theological work by drawing on a method that gave them an opportunity to find interpretative meaning from life experiences in combination with supportive biblical sources under a hope that they could work toward a form of liberation realizable in their lifetimes. By transporting the magisterium into the process, another "master intellect" is introduced not so much to guide but decide the content. On a barely perceptible level Gutiérrez has usurped people's right to be independent thinkers without having it undermined by the institution. It brings into the liberatory equation an element that is structured hierarchically. Undoubtedly the process by which the magisterium arrives at its theological positions is a vastly different intellectual process not linked to the same strands of analysis or goals that established liberation theology's initial relevance in the lives of its participants. The magisterium's theoretical viewpoint is guided by criteria not linked to the type of analysis found in marxism or some of the other forms of critical social thought that brought a renewed pertinence of religious experience to the lives of participants. There is a sense of having abandoned a course of development by lifting theology (at least the idea of) from service to the people to being their religious master. As

81 For interesting examples of this process see the collection of excerpts from the CEBS at Solentiname in Nicaragua edited by Ernesto Cardenal.

82 Leonardo Boff once said, using the ever popular Christian metaphor of the sheep and shepherd, that the role of the priest or shepherd is to follow not lead. Leonardo Boff, Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church, (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1986), p. 61. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz in La Lucha In the Struggle: Elaborating a mujerista theology
though to contest criticisms of his abandonment of a liberation theology seeking a course of intellectual autonomy, Gutiérrez in his new introduction, lists the number of "offspring" liberation theology has spurred including feminist, black and indigenous theologies. For Gutiérrez, these are the evidence of liberation theology's continued significance and success in creating "active agents" among Catholic Latin Americans. Such claims are broad and fraught with problems most notably those of feminists who have found no real commitment to their ideas among male colleagues unless they were willing to adopt less "contentious" critiques in order not to "lose the ground they had won."

Gutiérrez names women "a new presence" in the Church not acknowledging that women have always attended and supported the Church in larger numbers than men. The problem of women's so called absence from theological development rests with a male attitude that failed to see, acknowledge and give intellectual legitimacy to women. The narrowness of Gutiérrez's thinking on this new presence of women in the Church is extended when he notes how the institution has acknowledged the presence of women with references in the final document from the CELAM meetings in Puebla Mexico. The problem here is those references are not incorporated into the body of the document but exist strictly as footnotes with no obvious intellectual or analytical connection to how the document in its entirety was developed. Nor does he admit the inherent

---

(Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), states, "The faithful are far from being poor sheep who can be easily manipulated or who cannot judge for themselves." p. 151.


84 ibid, p. xx.
androcentric thinking in these references. As Pamela Brubaker states,

> the Puebla documents speak of woman's fundamental role as that of mother and charge that this role must shape women's social participation. Such understandings are not brought to bear on fathering or men's social participation.\(^5\)

Liberation theologians have not been particularly adept at admitting the deficiencies of their theology outside the criticisms made by the Vatican. Simply noting the existence of other complementary theologies or fields of analysis is inadequate against the gaps that exist in mainstream liberation theology. It is as though theologians are caught in their roles as beneficent patrons to their parishioners and as products of an institution that has had a powerful influence over their intellectual and religious lives. Gutiérrez seems not to realize that acknowledgement of other forms of oppression and analysis is inadequate when not subsumed into the body of the work itself. Without this, his own work demonstrates its limitations and continuation of exclusive practices that encourage the image of the faceless victim. As Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza stresses, mainstream liberation theology must learn from and incorporate what feminist theology has to offer in both its theoretical and practical applications as the only way to stave off threats to its integrity and worth in the future.\(^6\) By incorporating what feminist theology would have to offer in its critique of society, of gender, of class and of religion Gutiérrez would not be misappropriating the voices of women but deepening the value and analysis of his own work while at the same time bringing such ideas to a larger audience. It would recognize the importance of the contributions made by feminist theologians to liberatory theory and praxis while also allowing

---

\(^5\) Brubaker, p. 104.

them greater freedom and legitimacy in which to conduct their work. If Gutiérrez had really understood feminist theory or, for that matter, been able to discern the androcentric impulses in his own work, his current publications might have avoided his very inadequate responses to the advancements in understanding oppression offered by feminist theory. Gutiérrez has yet to acknowledge that feminist contributions in analysis and critical theory need to be woven into his method. This is not appropriation of voice but confirmation of the validity of those voices and their necessary presence in the work of others who are attending to social and political liberation.

The importance of incorporation or of adoption is not simply a question of the critical advancements of the individual or, of Gutiérrez's theology, but of the importance in terms of the leadership he holds in his Christian community. Even as liberation theology attempts to sidestep the question of leadership, there is no question that built into the system and the culture is a certain degree of enforced homage for those assigned greater institutional or economic status.

What makes Gutiérrez's critiques of his early work so frustrating is the one sidedness of those critiques and the complete lack of insight into the gaps or type of subjectivity present in the work he now does. So while being critical of the social sciences for being laddened with biases he makes no mention nor attempts to discern the biases that might come with the position he has now taken particularly with his adoption of papal statements or in the development of theological positions. The problem is not only contained to the statements per se but Gutiérrez's silence about the institution and the Pope who both continue to practise domination with a blindness to the repercussions of this on the Catholic community and particularly the lives of women.

The current papacy has commissioned for itself the role of moral arbitrator for a world it sees enmeshed in decay. Public pronouncements from the Vatican deride political forces for having
failed to eliminate the problems. Such failure though, has allowed the Vatican to etch out a new and perhaps more prominent role for itself globally as the mouthpiece for morality referring to preconciliar encyclicals to support its position.\textsuperscript{87} The goal of the current papacy is to "penetrate" in totality all of humanity's structures from its institutional expressions to its more individual travails. Therefore, while papal documents may refer to the people and the desperate situations in which they find themselves such talk is not linked to any basis in class theory. Rather, the Church derives its views from its conception of itself in society as the primary sustainer of culture. And by culture, the Vatican means all components in which "an individual participates."\textsuperscript{88}

The Vatican's program for exerting its moral imperative on the world involves a continuation of its strong public pronouncements and published encyclicals in addition to a program meant to evangelize vast regions of the Christian world.\textsuperscript{89} In light of this understanding of the current Vatican program the adoption of its policies if even in fragmented form, contradicts the aspirations of liberation theology that saw a levelling of the Church, and its practices to be more in line with egalitarian and inclusive methods. In Gutiérrez's own words, the Church is called upon to experience "new experiments in the task of evangelization, in the task of calling people together in ecclesiam. We shall live new ways of being present in the world of the people, ways that will transcend all institutional rigidity."\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{87} José-Mario Ghio, "The Latin American Church and the Papacy of Wojtyla," in \textit{The Right and Democracy in Latin America}. Edited by Atilio A. Boron et al. (New York: Praeger, 1992), p. 190.

\textsuperscript{88} Ghio, p. 195.

\textsuperscript{89} p. 197.

\textsuperscript{90} Gustavo Gutiérrez, \textit{The Power of the Poor}, p. 70.
The Vatican's focus is not on social movements that might alter political and economic conditions. Rather its thinking vis a vis change is linked to a spiritual or internal conversion of the individual.  

The changes, and more significantly the compromises that Gutiérrez has made to preserve some form of liberation theology, bode poorly for a theology once was based firmly on strengthening community and community projects. At that time, Gutiérrez called for a revolution that would move beyond national borders eventually encompassing all of Latin America in an attempt to intensify its ideological bases against the economic interests of the wealthy and their ties to foreign investors. The process of liberation was to induce more critical input to the development of both theology and social praxis. In doing this neither would stagnant in universal truths but constantly be called to account for their relevance in the community so as to deepen faith and commitment to one another.

A Theology of Liberation: The Original and the Revised

In the new introduction to A Theology of Liberation meant to bring the reader up to date with his current thinking, Gutiérrez effects a dramatic theological shift by conflating the universality of God's love with "the preferential option for the poor," a statement adopted by the Latin American bishops at Puebla. Unfortunately the phrase has been misunderstood by many who see it as an admission to God's exclusive love and concern for one group thus causing friction within the Church. Once again in an effort to appease all sides, Gutiérrez compromises by asserting that neither the universality of God's love nor the "preferential option of the poor" may have

---


92 Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation.
dominance over the other. The equalizing mechanism he hopes to achieve is at the expense of praxis and its expression in the political and social domains. By focusing on the poor, the Church and the community were compelled to see injustice in concrete terms and to accept that suffering does come in degrees perpetuated by the complicity of society itself. However, the statement was never meant to disavow the personal suffering of individuals. To focus on poverty was intended to compel a responsibility on the part of the Church and the community to seek change and to see in this God's approval of such an enterprise. Individual suffering eclipses social and political intrigue. It avoids the issue of community transformation of political and social structures and systems. Once the focus is shifted away from the poor, praxis is altered to refer to one's personal obedience to God's love. Community again is lost as a priority as is the commitment to work toward some definable social embodiment within society. Initially in his work, Gutiérrez placed praxis meaning social community action as the first step in his liberatory method, now in this modified form, praxis is individualized and follows theology. These changes diminish the value of community, of community input into a relevant theology of their own making, and of the possibilities of linking the Church to more democratic practices particularly as theology seizes the preeminent position of Gutiérrez's new cycle of emancipatory method. In this new schema praxis as a secondary action to theology is linked to a privatized relationship to God before it ever comes in contact with the world. Formerly, praxis was community centred, allowing for groups to arrive at theological conclusions that could be extended into some action that sought to change the misery that surrounded them. Praxis, in this sense, drew into a dialectic the religious

---

93 A Theology of Liberation, Revised edition, p. xxvi.

94 Gutiérrez, p. xxx.
dimensions of living with the secular.

Gutiérrez's hermeneutical circle in the original version found praxis at the very beginning and theological development an outcome of that experience. He envisioned the relationship in an unending cyclical fashion allowing the two to be reformed through their perpetual interplay. In the most recent version, Gutiérrez begins with "critical reflection on the word of God" as it is received through the Church that in turn "make[s] explicit faith, hope and love" as the step prior to the developing of praxis, a reversal of his earlier position. Horkheimer once said that the status quo fears the independence of the intellectual enterprise for what it might bode for its stability. An independent thinking biblical group might in fact challenge the institutional Church in ways which would diminish its authority, its membership by dividing it, and perhaps its refusal to give financially.

Gutiérrez's response to critiques that praxis has been emptied of its activism rests in his belief that spiritual commitment must precede any other activity. The answer is evasive since commitment either to the Church or to God were never contested elements in liberation theology. In committing to the construction of a just world, believers were assured they were attending faithfully to God's desires for them. Liberation theologians have long said that spirituality is a vital dimension in personal conversion but they added that the emphasis on individual conversion

\footnote{ibid, p. xxxiii.}

\footnote{Horkheimer, p. 232.}

\footnote{For a discussion on Vatican concerns of its finances see, Michael Budde's \textit{The Two Churches: Catholicism and Capitalism in the World System}, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992).}
is insufficient when not linked to a complementary activism to bring about a new society.98

Gutiérrez's error is in presuming that the spiritual component was in fact absent, or that there lacked alternatives to engendering a more emotive commitment to God not institutionally driven. The emphasis placed on spirituality implies the need for conversion, and yet the type of conversion implicated is one driven by the institution and therefore lacking in the freedom to convert to a more material human involvement in transforming society. Whereas feminist theologians have demonstrated that commitment to a deity need not be at the cost of social and political engagement nor the reverse.99 The same can be seen in the work of Father Ernesto Cardenal in the Christian communities in Solentiname Nicaragua from which he published not formal theological treatises but the conversations of participants who brought together their life experiences, their faith and their analysis of biblical sources.100 The spirituality the Church appears to be proposing is one of individual and silent contemplation. While valid, its promotion supersedes other expressions of spirituality that include a commitment to community and political action as Christians. In ridding praxis of its community and political responsibility, and experience no longer a central player in the development of theology the outcome is a situation where people formerly encouraged to believe they were legitimate bearers of knowledge and therefore capable of developing theological themes, are undermined in their own process toward liberation on an

98 Again for an extended discussion of this see Jon Sobrino's Spirituality of Liberation.

99 Judith Plaskow has written extensively on this particularly in her work Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1990). pp. 232-238. Although such commitment does indeed come more in play with compromise once faith is channelled through an institution.

individual and community basis.

Presently, Gutiérrez advocates a process of "reflection" on praxis in order to draw orthopraxis and orthodoxy more effectively in line with one another.¹⁰¹ The call for a spiritual connection to praxis under the auspices of the Church ends in being an admonishment for those whose lives are as he says too centred in political activism.¹⁰² Alistair Kee, prior to the recent changes in the work of Gutiérrez, believed liberation theology's invention of "orthopraxis" was simply another term to re-emphasize the institution's right to intercede and evaluate the legitimacy of its parishioners activities.¹⁰³ This incongruity in meaning resides in praxis' own definition which has always seemed too loose, too elusive a term allowing it to be applied to any form of action or definition of political. Even though praxis lacked a clear political and social definition it still remained linked to an existent world. Its elusive quality opened the way for a variety of activities potentially with a minimal amount of interference or judgement from local Churches. It meant the involvement of parishioners in local soup kitchens, day cares, lobbies for adequate water systems or for appeals to end government sanctioned violence. Praxis, as it is conceived now, is removed from this broad social connection resulting in an obscuring of its liberative value aside from its containment of people's activities and their theological perspectives.

In the new edition of A Theology of Liberation, Gutiérrez changed the title of chapter twelve from "Christian Brotherhood and Class Struggle" to "Faith and Social Conflict." In a footnote to

¹⁰¹ A Theology of Liberation p. xxxiii.

¹⁰² p. xxxiii.

¹⁰³ Alistair Kee, p. 174. He continues by commenting, "By a radical appropriation of Marxist critical theory this Moses of orthopraxis has brought liberation theology to the very frontiers of a new epoch but, like Moses he does not himself enter the promised land."
these changes, Gutiérrez says the alterations were made in "light of new documents of the magisterium," to eliminate any misconceptions of previous statements. At one time this chapter exemplified liberation theology's commitment to an analysis that pulled inequities into a political and economic reality. In the first edition, the emphasis rested in an assessment of how class divisions led to unjust economic, political and social disparities. He elaborated on how these economic delineations were evident in the Church itself and suggested that the unity the Church strove to promote was a utopian desire not possible until the divisions in class that left a large sector of society vulnerable to the claims of the monied were addressed and resolved. Gutiérrez's inclusion of the Church as an example of class conflict had two purposes: first, to illustrate the Church's construct as a fully human one and secondly, its own practice of collusion in upholding the status quo. In critiquing the Church's call for unity, Gutiérrez was pointing to the inherent injustices found throughout society as opposed to some bishops who claimed that liberation theology was the catalyst in a ploy to create a parallel Church. Gutiérrez's reminder of oppression being the cause of social unrest was aimed at shifting the blame from those contesting to those perpetuating unjust systems.

When Gutiérrez wrote *A Theology of Liberation* he saw social revolution as the sole recourse to a society profoundly affected by political and economic injustice. And while revolution appeared to be the means, socialism was definitely the political solution of choice for a more

---

104 p. 156fn.

105 p. 274 (first edition)

106 His intent however was not to write a Theology of Revolution which he saw too embedded in violence. (Fierro, p. 18).
compassionate society. The two were not uncommon themes in the late 1960s and for most of the 1970s. And since Latin America's most overriding depiction was one of abject poverty and ferocious military governments the reliance on marxist theory to address the times and the complexity of oppression was neither out of place nor uncalled for. If liberation theologians were to read "the signs of the times" as Gaudium et Spes had demanded, marxist theory was both a logical and adept tool at revealing the roots of oppression.

The liberatory project Gutiérrez constructed had two major components that were fully dependent on each other. The first was rooted in a critique of classism. The second component flowed from the first and aimed at reconstructing a theology that would bring change to people's lives that would eliminate the domination of one class over another while returning them to a religiously relevant life. This reconstruction project enlisted a reworked theology meant to encourage people's engagement by demonstrating God's reassurance of such activity and marxism's claim that only humanity can alter concrete conditions. The element Gutiérrez would emphasize in his revisions was the need for God's ultimate intervention, as an act of grace for a truly just society to find realization. In many ways the mixing of marxism and theology led to an odd combination, not because of marxism's atheism, but rather because of theology's resistance to a free humanity as well as to a thorough critique of its own construction. Marxism insists the


108 The failure of liberation theology in part according to Alistair Kee is situated in theologians' reworking of marx's analysis on religion to their own engagement with religion and social action. (Kee, p. 178).

responsibility lies fully with society to transform itself whereas theology, to the contrary can function to limit human freedom by formulating evasive if not mysterious functions for God who ultimately controls the historical future of humankind. Without the contribution of marxism's assertions on human endeavour in community settings, the emphasis is returned to a hierarchy that demands individual conversion as a direct request from divine sources.

The revised chapter 12 comes after the return of fledgling democracies to many parts of Latin America and after Gutiérrez's confrontation with the Vatican. Following these events social revolution loses its political viability even as the conditions of poverty that originally motivated Gutiérrez and others to commit themselves to liberation theology go unchanged. The result is a vacuum in theory. Gutiérrez has not merely rid his work of marxist underpinnings but he distances himself further from his analytical roots by suggesting that social theories lack credibility or usefulness because of their inherent biases. Gutiérrez's accusation is baffling in light of his earlier criticisms of the Church that noted injustices within its own ranks. A rather rhetorical question emerges of how an institution recognized as hierarchical and authoritarian in its treatment of its employees and congregational members by liberation theologians, can be legitimatized as a more reliable source for uncovering oppressive ties in society than those working in the area of social analysis and not connected to an institution with clear ethical and theological designs. The consequences of this shift for a theology that fought to be relevant not to an institution but to a people are immense. The refusal to employ a social theory more cognizant of poverty and its social and political impact on the lives of women and men (as being

110 Although there is much touting of economic success in places such as Chile it is clear that the wealth and benefits of a market economy have yet to filter down to the poor. See the Globe and Mail, March 10, 1998.
configured differently depending on gender) is linked to Gutiérrez's skirting of self-critique that was once touted as the feature that would assure longevity to this theology.

His latest publications use the pronouncements of the papacy as an example of the essence of compassion rather than the opposite of a Church blind to the realities of people's lives or the acceptance of the individual choices people make because of economic, political and social-psychological conditions. In turn, liberation is encouraged in the secular world among individuals but not under mandates that might link movements to economic systems out of favour in the Vatican. Still Gutiérrez is silent on the changes needed in the institution, in its authoritarian positioning of itself, or in how biblical sources are understood and interpreted. The question of authority and its influences is left unexamined. The emancipation of the theology from the limited realms of institutional and androcentric aims remains a distant aspiration for those hoping for its revival among mainstream theologians.

In the early years of his career, Gutiérrez detailed the failings of the institutional Church. He wrote against the Church's neglect to treat poor parishioners as full participants in determining theological meaning, the Church's hierarchical structure predicated on its so called proximity to the Word of God allowing it to eclipse its responsibility to the socially constructed reality of its structure.\(^{111}\)

Gutiérrez asserts that the changes he has made are the result of an intellectual maturation.\(^{112}\) On closer view this maturation is marked by the withdrawal of autonomy in analysis and perhaps even is responsible for the outcome of not only Gutiérrez's work but of the work occurring in

\(^{111}\) See *The Power of the Poor in History*, pp. 33ff.

CEBS. I wonder as well if the slow pace of change within Christian Base Communities led Gutiérrez to feel less committed to the original meanings he attached to praxis and spirituality.\(^{113}\)

In their original meaning both are linked to his call for revolutionary change conjuring an image fraught with immediacy. In \textit{A Theology of Liberation} he wrote,

> But theological categories are not enough. We need a vital attitude, all embracing and synthesizing, informing the totality as well as every detail of our lives; we need a 'spirituality'. Spirituality, in the strict sense and profound sense of the word is the dominion of the Spirit. If 'the truth shall set you free' (John 8:32), the Spirit 'will guide you into all truth' (John 16:13) and will lead us to complete freedom, the freedom from everything that hinders us from fulfilling ourselves as human beings and offspring of God and with others....A spirituality is a concrete manner, inspired by the Spirit, of living the Gospel; it is a definite way of living 'before the Lord,' in solidarity with all human beings, 'with the lord,' and before human beings...to live this experience as a result of their [Christians'] commitment to the process of liberation.\(^{114}\)

Perhaps the actual results of his method in the lives of people were too vulnerably established to warrant the continuation of the original sense in praxis. The slow pace of change and the onset of democracy with a wearied populace from decades of political polarization may also have contributed to shifts in Gutiérrez's thinking. And, to a certain extent his ideas were suddenly determined invalid in a context that ideally depends on the political participation of all citizens.\(^{115}\)

\(^{113}\) Here I am referring to liberation theology's use of Christian Base Communities. The focus of the fourth chapter is the function and efficacy of CEBS. McGovern also notes Gutiérrez's shift to theological matters and lack of social analysis in his work beginning in the 1980s. (McGovern, p. 133). McGovern also registers some concern for liberation theology's future in his conclusion where he comments that a new generation of theologians is needed (here he sees feminists playing a role), greater self-critique and more profound social analysis.(McGovern, pp. 232-233).

\(^{114}\) \textit{A Theology of Liberation}, Revised Edition, p. 117.

\(^{115}\) McGovern has emphasized that the political impact of liberation theology has actually been overly estimated. (McGovern, p. 231). Likewise he stresses the impact of the Church and its resistance to change, the replacement of liberatory priests with conservative ones and the adherence to orthodoxy and authority above the importance of "social concerns" that have all contributed to liberation theology's more muted liberatory impact. (McGovern, p. 231).
Democracy granted him the political space to retreat from the daily trials of denouncing the atrocities of corrupt military governments. In simplistic terms, with the inauguration of democracy the expectation of an end to state sanctioned injustice by a government elected through a collective will meant the resurgence of political equality. Gutiérrez might have elected to choose a route more carefully attuned to liberation theology's original precepts that would have benefitted by his political and religious prominence but in ways that begin by broadening theological and social thinking into the arenas of race, gender and sexuality and followed by a diversity of applications in local communities. This keeps the theology relevant and the work toward political justice in place but through a method that becomes more finely tuned to the current political climate and its demands. What he has not recognised is the existence of alternative modals. Such as Sonia Alvarez's suggestion of inserting a feminist political agenda into the state when apertures occur. This might also work in the case of the Church if liberation theologians could ascertain those spaces and moments when the institution might allow change.

State is not monolithically masculine or antifeminist. If we 'unpack' the State and examine its multiple institutional and ideological instances, we may find points of access, points where concerted gender-conscious political pressure might make a difference.\textsuperscript{116}

Liberation theology in the 1970s rose in prominence for its relevance to those times and its capacity to address the needs of the people. The recent changes made to Gutiérrez's rendering of liberation theology are all the more stunning in what they represent when set as an antithesis to a collection of articles assembled by Orbis Press in 1983 and written by Gutiérrez throughout the 1970s. In some ways The Power of the Poor in History is a natural outcome of the earlier version

of A Theology of Liberation that represents the ideas that identify liberation theology's theory and method. Liberation, critical social analysis, praxis and a flexibility in theological notions in order best to reflect the lives of the poor are constant themes throughout the collection of articles but with a more precise attention to application that A Theology of Liberation lacked. For example two of the articles deal specifically with Puebla, one addressing the preparatory document issued by the conservative bishop Trujillo and the second, a post meeting assessment. The articles are compelling for their attention to events and problems that threaten the stability of Latin Americans' lives or their capacity to live under a variety of forms of domination found in political and religious structures.\textsuperscript{117} The two main features in this collection are their persistent heed to the physical conditions of the poor and their plea for action against those very repressive conditions. These particular features were purposeful in a climate that was polarized by political and military extremism and where military governments became equated with legalized state terror in their venture to squash any and all forms of social resistance on the part of citizens. The result was a civil population terrorized into silence needing both justification and institutional support to provide the authority to continue their struggles against the state.\textsuperscript{118} Under these conditions, Gutiérrez's writing, his active participation in social and religious groups provided a strong stimulus for others to do likewise. So it is in this climate that his writings in the 1970s must be understood. They functioned to clarify issues and admonish inaction as a sign of compliance to repressive regimes. Certainly it was politically motivated as all attention to justice

\textsuperscript{117} The Power of the Poor in History, pp. 111-152.

must be but not without strong and extensive theological foundations.

The charged tenor of this decade spawned the need to speak of dramatic structural changes in society. Talk of revolution, and the necessity of retributive violence were important and apropos topics when confronted by death squads slaughtering randomly.\(^{119}\) The Church found itself embroiled in the violence with priests and religious being deported, imprisoned or assassinated for the support they lent to popular groups. Undoubtedly the 1970s mark liberation theology's most vigorous and daring stage. Beginning in the early 1980s the discourse on class analysis, the primacy of praxis, and the call to integrate the voices of the marginalized becomes muted against the advancements of democratic governments and a Vatican seriously concerned about the rancorous divisions within its midst.

The theological foundation on which Gutiérrez premises all his work is on a God whose principle concern is the liberation of oppressed groups. Substantiation for such claims is found in scriptural passages with particular emphasis placed on the Exodus story.\(^{120}\) The rescue of the Hebrew people functions as an allegory for the primacy of liberatory themes based on the deity's particular concern for those suffering under oppressive regimes. The value of the Exodus story

\(^{119}\) See the homilies of Archbishop Oscar Romero as a prime example of how the urging of transformation was accompanied by denunciations and talk of the rights of citizens. See Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements, Archbishop Oscar Romero (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985) and The Violence of Love: The Pastoral Wisdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero, compiled and translated by James R. Brockman (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988). However the very best examples are Romero's homilies published in their entirety in Spanish. Each homily began with a denunciation of atrocities and a calling to task of those culpable. Si me matan resucitare en el pueblo salvadoreno, published by CELADEC, 1980, further bibliographical material not available.

\(^{120}\) This is not to say the Christian texts are ignored; in fact they are dealt with more extensively than the Hebrew texts but it is the story of the exodus that has special meaning.
was in its capacity to function as a meta-narrative embodying the hope and possibilities for all oppressed people transcending time and ethnicity. The story is opportune in that it contains the precise elements to support liberation theology's early theoretical premises. It demonstrates God's active presence in history on behalf of the deity's preferred people and as liberation theologians describe it, any group suffering the injustice at the bidding of political and social elites. The story of the exodus frames people's right and obligation to battle against oppression while affording them the hope that just freedom might be possible in their own lifetimes.

There are serious problems in the use of the Exodus story as a metanarrative for liberation in its neglect to reflect the reality or specificity of people's lives or, the type of action required by humans of their own invention to end the repression without waiting for some divine apparition to materialize to direct their actions. And like most metanarratives it lends itself well toward an essentializing or romanticizing of a people and their struggles. Nor does it explain how to recognize God's actions in history without waiting for an extraordinary act of proof.

Nevertheless, the exodus story served as a mobilizing image to gather support and enthusiasm for social action during this revolutionary anti-colonial era.121 The moment in which liberation theology currently operates is no longer revolutionary, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat claim it is a "transitional moment in history" where the "emergence of new forms of selfhood, political allegiance, capital accumulation, imperial power, and mass migration,...are perhaps still only half-visible."122 With the end of revolutionary discourse comes the end of the usefulness of meta-


122 Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat, p. 2.
narratives that provided clarity to symbolic notions like liberation in their time but eclipsed the other notions of oppression that persist in requiring explanation and political response in the more diffused political climate of the present. The transition period has signalled a return to a reified notion of the poor able to find contentment in their poverty and service to the deity in such works as Gutiérrez's *We Drink from our own Wells: the Spiritual Journey of a People*.

In contrast throughout all eight articles collected in *The Power of the Poor in History*, Gutiérrez was still refashioning theological terms and interpretations to meet with his emancipatory purposes. "Holiness", "love", the "covenant" and the "eucharist" all fit into a schema where justice is recognized as God's prime concern for humankind in this historical moment. Gutiérrez contends that it is total liberation he seeks that exposes the heart of all "injustice and exploitation", and a liberation not tied to the privacy of spirituality that he saw as confining praxis.

Faith left the threshold of institutional control in these early works to be part of the process or renewed commitment to God and God's wishes for the creation of a just society. In his hermeneutical circle, faith follows both humanity's relationship with God, and God's response to humanity in the unfolding of history. In such a scenario faith is framed by a relationship between deity and believer that recognizes and agonizes over the conditions that a large proportion of humanity suffers. The situation or context is understood in light of what individuals discern as God's plea for humanity. Faith then is able to imbue that history with additional

123 ibid, p. 2.
124 *The Power of the Poor*, p. 51.
125 *A Theology of Liberation*, revised edition, p. 5.
emotive meaning and force in the emancipatory struggle. Human action, or practice is what Gutiérrez calls, "the locus of verification of faith in God" meaning that faith and practice function in a dialectic building and reforming one another while always confirming the presence of the liberator God. Faith alone without action is meaningless as is spirituality serving no purpose other than confirming the kind of privatized Christianity of a Christian choosing the status quo.¹²⁶

In his article, "Involvement in the Liberation Process" Gutierrez alludes to a Church tethered to the repressive machinery of the state and demands that it "break its ties with the present order."¹²⁷ For him, there is only one single process of human development, not splintered or divisive processes dominated by individual interests. Incorporated in his appeal to one national liberation movement, is the liberation of the Church. He demanded in this article that the Church end its "discrepancy between preaching and practice" in acknowledgement of God's own interest in "all dimensions of human existence."¹²⁸ His demand was for continuity in theory and practice so as not to be caught pleading for justice while in practice supporting the interests of ecclesial and political elites. What makes these articles compelling is their potential in terms of change within the Church and the warnings they heed in terms of the outcome if radical transformation is not effected that Gutiérrez seems not to draw into his current work. He recognized the need for a "church that will be radically different from the one we know today"¹²⁹ and perhaps even more striking is his warning that "the greatest threat will be the temptation to immobility and a

¹²⁶ Horkheimer, p. 130.
¹²⁷ The Power of the Poor, p. 29.
¹²⁸ ibid., p. 29.
¹²⁹ p. 29.
preference for changes that do not really change the existing situation. We are more bound to the old structures than we realize.¹³⁰

Throughout the 1970s, there is a constancy in Gutiérrez's hope for the growth of national (if not also continent wide) liberation movements. The difference, so he maintained was that while all theologies are human created, he was willing to admit this whereas others too frequently placed their theologies in a realm supposedly removed from human content or aim by universalizing its precepts. Change, he claimed in thinking, in structures, in systems, and in cultural embodiments, would only result as the world learned to open itself to more just practices. Gutiérrez's comments on the state of theological development and who does it was to convince those writing to accept the biases that permeate how their thoughts on theology are formulated and their connections to centres of power.¹³¹ Learning about oppression, in Gutiérrez's terms was a gathering of a special form of knowledge expressing love for those for whom survival is of primary concern. This love he described needed to be accompanied by a responsibility to act on the injustices that this knowledge brings. And while he gave the Church an opportunity to rethink its links with the status quo, he dealt it another blow by subordinating the importance of all theology to popular programs addressing injustice. The critique reminded theologians that their knowledge had to reflect the political and social realities named and described by the larger of the faith constituencies.

Central to the process of developing an awareness of injustice is of course the marginalized whose voices must be heard and whose own programs for justice must be respected as a right of

¹³⁰ p. 34.
¹³¹ p. 90.
self-determination. The consequence of this for professional theologians as Gutiérrez saw it, was the importance in remaining silent until the poor had been heard. This move to alter how theology developed was a way of subverting traditional hierarchies that place the authority of discernment and the source of knowledge among priests and theologians. In his argumentation, Gutiérrez articulated that legitimate knowledge could flow from corridors not recognized by elites, namely those not trained professionally in the field of theology suggesting that elites needed to disavow themselves of the attitudes that have become integrated into cultural patterns. Gutiérrez had understood at this time as Mary Romero writes, "as members of the status quo, their knowledge [as elites] is embedded in ideological systems that justify their superior social positions, and, consequently, their experiences are quite limited."

In this collection of articles, Gutiérrez continues to berate traditional theology for proclaiming universal truths without attention to the specifics of the lives of individuals. Not only did he perceive the injustice of elite theologians speaking for a class of people without access to privilege, he recognised that economic and political injustices were fed by unjust power relations present at every level of social formation. Because of these conditions and elites' negation of their existence, Gutiérrez knew that those living in poverty could provide important alternative perspectives and actions needed to force elites from their positions of authority. The people Gutiérrez represented in CEBS were searching for greater depth in their religious devotions hoping, as he was, to connect their histories of oppression with a link to God who came to them

---

132 p. 91.

unfiltered through a much more accessible trajectory. The emphasis was placed on this deity who could intimately empathize with their suffering and its injustice.

And above all they didn't believe in him because he [Jesus] was the son of a workman. They kept rubbing it in that he was the carpenter. If he'd been rich and powerful maybe it would have been easier for them to think he'd come down from heaven.134

In liberation theology's practice in CEBS God was seen to support people's attempts to end injustice's dominance. In a twist to this disempowering of traditional links to knowledge and theological meanings for spirituality, Gutiérrez raised the stature of praxis by defining it as a form of spirituality with its intent to establish just relations with all of humanity.

Silence has played an integral but dual role in the history of the oppressed. It has been employed as a subversive tool against the oppressor but perhaps more brutally silence, or rather imposed silence has been the predominant weapon of the oppressor against the oppressed. As a weapon against the oppressed silence rids the marginalized of any presence or right to function, participate or determine the construction of the dominant world. The stories, memories and events in the lives of the poor have been kept absent from mainstream discourse as a way of denying their legitimacy.135 By Gutiérrez's account of the process toward liberation which he saw as a continual one embodied in one history, his intent was to expose mechanisms like that of enforced silence, that impede people's right to form their identities by "cross[ing] the borders" of class, race and gender and in doing so expose the errors in ideologies meant to contain the


135 The proliferation of testimonios in the 1980s was an attempt to bring the knowledge of those kept silent to the consciousness of the privileged, most notably North American and European audiences.
activities and growth of oppressed peoples.\textsuperscript{136}

In "The Historical Power of the Poor" Gutiérrez argued that a corrupted history had forced the poor to become victims of an economic system that left them without access to decent standards of living or without political or social admittance to contest systemic injustice.\textsuperscript{137} The rhetoric of nationalism envisioned the state as an ideal authoritarian family charged with providing for all citizens and yet most Latin Americans were left to fend for themselves in a state that limited the possibilities for survival. Instead of looking to the state, Catholic activists shifted their sights to a god who was unconnected to institutions and who, through this autonomy, was able to offer the needed rationale albeit with the authority of a omnipotent god for those battling against oppression. Isolation or abandonment were the images Gutiérrez had for what had befallen millions of Latin Americans. It was abandonment by the institutions (including the Church) whose responsibility it was to respond compassionately and actively. And isolation in the suffering the poor endured in a state that sought to grip its power above the needs of the majority.

Even though Gutiérrez tended to essentialize the poor or endow them with some higher innate knowledge, he did, in these earlier years, adamantly demand that critique remain part of the process. And, as he said, a critique that would lead to reasoned judgements. His fear rested in the development of ideologies that would succeed in replicating the means of production among the oppressors eventually stagnating liberative processes or eliminating freedom of ideas and actions.

\textsuperscript{136} Patricia Zavella, "Reflection on Diversity among Chicanas," in Challenging Fronteras, p. 188. By one history I mean a history in which the divine is actively present as opposed to a history of human construct and one of divine intervention at some later point.

\textsuperscript{137} The Power of the Poor in History, pp. 77ff.
The articles in this collection are Gutiérrez's most powerful statements on class analysis, the right of the poor to establish their own theological and political positions and on the Church's seemingly reluctant if not resolute stance to resist change. These articles are denunciatory documents that move beyond protest by expanding into discussions of social commitment and change. The social analysis may not be complex necessarily but the claims are poignant and arresting demonstrating what could be liberation theology's biting independence from political and religious structures. The vehemence contained in these articles end in this decade, later works emphasize Gutiérrez's theological ties to the institution and its thrust for a more individualized commitment to the Church through spirituality. After The Power of the Poor in History, Gutiérrez's work loses its focus on social analysis and with this much of what framed liberation theology as distinct from other theologies, including the poor's right to determine the content of their religious lives. We Drink from our own Wells as a witness to the spiritual depth of the "poor" and On Job, as a text of purely theological orthodoxy, were Gutiérrez's next predominant publications that best illustrate how he moved from an emphasis on material focus to a spirituality devoid of social context or consequence.

The Final Shift: On Job

On Job is considered Gutiérrez's most important theological work for its attention to a complex biblical source that raised significant questions on suffering and the relationship between Christians and their god. Working on the book of Job correlates to Gutiérrez's life long concentration on questions of suffering; how to understand its existence; why it exists and the part God plays in eliminating its presence. So, Gutiérrez in On Job, attempts to find a way to "speak
of God in the midst of suffering." His conclusions indicate that suffering is not unique to a select group of individuals but universally and arbitrarily present. While true the statement begs the question of the presence of the poor and liberation theology's own earlier contention that special attention was required of the suffering of the poor noted in the bishops adoption of "the preferential option for the poor" at Puebla.

Gutiérrez's choice of Job is perplexing, and creates more inconsistencies within liberation theology than any problems it might solve. The suffering of Job is so unlike the suffering of Latin Americans. Job's is but the result of a vile game wrought on him by a god who seeks to prove a point on the quality of Job's unique faith. With this in mind, the difficulty is in correlating the loving and compassionate god found in *A Theology of Liberation* or some of Gutiérrez's other works with one rising to the venture of a wager. In this context, *On Job* explains nothing of the origin of suffering, its connection to the human use of power in institutions and systems or of God's desire that humans work toward its elimination.

Good works, as Job and his neighbours learn, are not a prerequisite to human happiness. Instead, the Book of Job, as Gutiérrez sees it, teaches humans to rely on the "gratuitousness of God's love." Christians are taught that universal suffering can only be eliminated by God's intervention or will. Essentially this deals a fundamental blow to liberation theology's contention that humans hold a responsibility to exert their own wills against the conditions that create injustice. Whereas once Gutiérrez claimed that justice was in reach of Latin Americans, now the implications of his work on Job suggest that Christians must wait for God to intercept at some

---


139 Ibid, p. 15.
mysterious moment in an unknown future on their behalf acknowledging that their actions are never worthy of any divine response.

Gutiérrez does not completely disassociate himself from ideas of human responsibility but the content no longer points to committed community action. Instead he suggests rather apolitically that those who carry "lighter burdens" should engage in "solidarity" with those whose burdens are heavier. There is no sense of what these burdens consist of, or of how solidarity should extend beyond an ephemeral support that can be withdrawn at any time into committed action. The suggestion, while not articulated, leans toward a sense that charity rather than solidarity is being proposed by references that fail to reflect the historical conditions of oppression and the right of oppressed people to act as the agents of their own destiny.⁴⁰ It calls on the reader to suspend judgement on the perversity of God's actions.

Gutiérrez's work On Job is an uncritical defense of a biblical source that, ironically for its emphasis on the subject, has in the end little to say on human suffering. It fails to offer a reasonable response to human and divine relations without eliminating the right of Christians to demand clearer answers from God. The relationship is unquestionably one of a sovereign and its vassals. Gutiérrez rejects questions in Job that might suggest God's complicity in suffering either through silence or through, as Job experienced, acts meant to test his allegiance. It is a return to passive beliefs that rest on notions of suffering "being God's will." In terms of Gutiérrez's thinking, it demonstrates his lack of critical attention to theology that Alfredo Fierro noted in his earlier works.⁴¹ The fact that Job learns how to speak of God in the midst of suffering belies the

⁴⁰ p. 15.

⁴¹ Fierro, p. 344.
important question of God's own integrity in causing suffering for personal satisfaction. Gutiérrez neglects to employ a critique that would call into question the methods of God to prove the loyalty of Job through the imposition of violence or, one that would raise questions of the biblical source for present times in light of liberation theology's commitment to human intervention on oppression as a form of expression of faith. Still, Gutiérrez insists that as Job learns to identify with the suffering of the poor, his discourse with God finds greater depth allowing him to speak "prophetically" of God. The process leads Job to "a gradual increase in [his] faith and hope." This could almost be the liberation theology of the past if it were not disconnected to historical conditions, or the result of a god's wager, or for the lack of critical analysis. Gutiérrez has rarely used biblical sources critically or claimed their inadequacy for explaining features of oppression today. In contrast, Segundo explains of Jesus, "If he were alive and active today he would say many things that would differ greatly from what he said twenty centuries ago." Gutiérrez seems unable to make this leap that would require him to examine critically biblical sources as historical responses to social and political contexts.

Gutiérrez, in a work distant from examinations on class or power inequities, neglects to indicate the elitism of the story or the lack of importance it places on the lives of others who are not as faithfully loyal or perceptive in God's estimation as Job. There are those whose faces and

143 On Job, p.48.
144 p. 66.
identities are obscured but suffer the fate of God's wager with their own lives; there are Job's friends, who however misdirected, attempt to explain what is inexplicable - the pervasiveness of suffering, and finally there is Job who is God's most ardent client. Suffering is only ever explained in terms of its pervasiveness not its causes. The discourse Job has with God establishes the rules and dimensions of human loyalty and faith but not God's responsibility to humanity.

Job, according to Gutiérrez, learns that humankind is not the centre of creation or that plants, animals and minerals have not been created solely for human use or consumption. Gutiérrez's intent probably was aimed at drawing attention to the human waste of the environment or humanity's sense of itself as having a more valued existence than that of other "creations." Unfortunately, Gutiérrez devalues human worth by limiting human agency and freedom to use what the earth has to offer.

The aim of the discussion on creation is to encourage humanity to think beyond its own parameters by realizing its less than central locus in the universe.146 This allows for a deity that sanctions humanity when it so chooses and not when humanity feels it worthy or painfully in need of some intercession or encouragement to act on their own.147 Job is directed by God not to judge all that occurs to him or around him by human standards. This begs the question by what standards and techniques are we to judge the world in which we live? If God is unknowable and indiscernible then so are this divinity's methods of evaluation. Gutiérrez leaves no room to explore the methods of moral judgement humans do have to evaluate the conditions in which they live, or the relationships they attempt to establish with God or among themselves. Human
reasoning has undoubtedly played a role in securing the required ideologies to establish oppression but the capacity to reason is how humans have been able to glimpse the injustice of oppression as well. The reasoning mind is the only tool humanity has by which to govern itself; to suggest otherwise is to limit Christians' impulse to act in the world. Gutiérrez does not deny the importance of protest but his discussion leaves political mobilisation without a secure historical or intellectual base.

On Job, while thoughtfully written and obviously carefully considered, does not advance the discussion on suffering or emancipation, the two components so intimately connected in liberation theology. What it does is state the obvious by endorsing suffering's universal presence and God's ultimate authority over its erasure. For Gutiérrez, in this work, the question is less one of the reasons for suffering and whether God acts in history to lessen the pain than humanity's relationship and responsibility to a distant and seemingly imperturbable god. If grace is such an unknown so too is salvation and indeed emancipation. And yet, Gutiérrez now suggests that liberation, or full liberation is not possible without God's intervention. But with a god who is all powerful, all knowing and yet unknowable how and when full liberation might be accomplished are a complete mystery so human actions can only succeed at being cosmetic cures. For the poor then suffering seems to be their fate.
Conclusion

By censuring the use of the social sciences, Gutiérrez has narrowed the theoretical and practical potential of the theology. Mariategui's statement that differing viewpoints and practices "enriched the conditions for fruitful theory" sits as an interesting antithesis to the exclusion of not merely the social sciences but the insights of poor women and men from Latin America in the texts of liberation theologians.¹⁴⁸ Gutiérrez's distancing from social analysis has an important impact on the liberatory principles of liberation theology itself that sought knowledge (in theory at the very least) from corridors not part of the mainstream. By returning theological authority to the institution legitimation for other forms of knowledge is taken away. A rift is created where the theory of the original liberation theology is taken from its practical embodiment in practice among faithful but socially, politically, economically and certainly religiously marginalized women and men. Instead, he acknowledges the authority of the institutional Church to determine the parameters of legitimate moral and theological knowledge and praxis. If such problems have emerged in the theology itself, the next chapter examines how liberation theology fared in the lives of those participating in Christian Base Communities.

¹⁴⁸ A Theology of Liberation, Revised edition, p. 56.
Chapter Three

Searching for Emancipative Space

...how amusing it must be `to the observer...to realize...how many things do not change with a revolution [and how] with the years they look less like spectacular social processes."

Oscar Rene Vargas' quote epitomizes not only the loss of tangible results but the swiftness with which advancements or what was once deemed a success can shift to have more in common with the usual way of doing and apprehending the world than representing a radically innovative method and way of thinking. My use of this quote is meant to set a tone of scepticism not only in terms of the success of CEBS in Latin America but more problematically to tender the difficulty feminists have in assessing the liberatory value of CEBS for women who participate in them.

In this chapter, women's oppression is once again discussed but within the context of the development of emancipatory methods in Christian Base Communities (CEBS) where the intent was to reveal and work toward the elimination of asymmetrical relations. This chapter has two objectives. The first is to continue the probe into the lives of women, particularly those of poor women; and secondly, to examine how CEBS were formed -- what they could have become for women and what in fact they are. The focus here is on unravelling the elements that stymied the possibility for a more detailed analyses of oppression, particularly that of gender in the face of enormous evidence of women's subordination in society.

The paradox present in any discussion of women's role in the Church, is in distinguishing the valuable role women play in religious venues from the roles they assume in order to abide by the

standards imposed on them by society but that lead them into subordinate positions. So while women are the predominant participants in religious activities, their overwhelming presence intimates the way in which their identities are linked into value systems that evaluate them on the extent of their submissiveness to normalized religious and moral practice. Their worth as women is predicated on assumptions beginning with women's so called greater faculty in spiritual endeavours while conversely being barred from the priesthood in the Catholic Church. From this so called spiritual stature their principal responsibility is in imparting to their children the utopian values by which society defines itself or by which nations are organized and through which women are evaluated as "either mediums or traitors." Women's role in the securing of society and nation is premised on defined moral parameters of conduct that "contain...their sense of self, [and through] the structure of oppression...make being a 'positioned subject' or 'crossing borders' problematic." In contrast, the rhetoric that defines men allows them to wander into the murky waters of questionable moral behaviour without risking injury to society, state or self.

Historically, the Catholic Church has assumed a significant part in the determination of virtues and roles for each gender on which women and men continue to be assessed not simply by the Church but by society as a whole. Men are allowed the image of the "macho male, aggressive sexual license" as though these were qualities suited to their public responsibilities whereas women are encouraged to fulfill "passive female chastity." These narrow and constraining images

---

2 Rodriguez, p. 60.


4 Zavella, p. 191.
have been used to define and create the binary of public and private space through which power is then dispersed through "a multiplicity of sites, including those places where benevolence, intimacy, or familiarity reign." What unfolds in the process of identity allocation is the use of "cultural ideology as cultural determinism" that calls on, as in this example used by Patricia Zavella, "working mothers [being] reminded of the importance of familism." The result is the "deploy[ment of] discourses that, to the extent they become hegemonic, can constitute knowledges, which, in turn, can condition the circulation of power itself." For this reason, discussions of religion and culture are imperative in illustrating the Catholic Church's involvement in the type of rhetoric meant to shape identities that for women has been built around their reproductive capacities.

Patriarchy has the effect of governing value systems proclaimed as universal but in cultural practice only women are expected to adhere to them fully. Should women choose or be forced to veer beyond these parameters of acceptable behaviour, they risk the condemnation of community for which they earn the entitlement of *mujeres malas*. Nowhere in this system is there room for critical assessment of the values themselves or their function in maintaining economic and political

---


6 Zavella, p. 191.


8 "*Mujeres malas*" literally means "bad women" or women outside the authority of the community or political, religious, and social powers -- for example prostitutes. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), p. 17.
systems at the cost of women's lives. Estrangement from community held values and practices can jeopardize the economic and familial security of these women by endangering those personal relationships that are relied on in times of crisis. In Nancy Scheper-Hughes study on women from Bom Jesus da Mata in Brazil, she found that women rely on their personal relationships with people of economic and political influence in times of crisis to secure services that would otherwise not be available to them.\(^9\) She found that

The narratives of Alto women resonate with accusations of injustice at the hands of their bad *patrōas* and with praise for rescue and redemption at the hands of their good ones. The *bom patrōa* is represented as nurturant protector, as the good parent in this familistic, patriarchal world.\(^10\)

Here it becomes clear how hierarchy in spite of political claims of democratizing processes is embedded in economic and social systems suggesting that the key to familial survival is not so much a question of how to resist hierarchy but how to access its complex workings.

The cultural ideology of Church and society assumes men will wander sexually, geographically and even economically as good times give into bad. Women, however, in this ideology are expected to remain rooted in place and enterprise and risk only within narrow boundaries to defend what limited economic security might exist as they are pressured to hold to identities that decide their self-worth. This identity is firmly rooted in images of "womanhood" that are premised on ideal depictions of motherhood, sacrifice and piety. The opposing side to this image and equally as damaging is that of the bitter, nagging, incomprehensible, uncomprehending woman who embitters the lives of those around her; the *mandaona* whose husband is but a

---


\(^10\) Scheper-Hughes, p. 113.
puppet to her wishes. Both images permeate popular culture making it difficult for women to encounter a legitimate space in which they can express themselves and the conditions of their lives under terms that are different from the norm without suffering further marginalization or judgement.

**Christian Base Communities: Their Goals and Their Problems**

CEBS were probably not the intellectually open sites they promoted themselves as when it came to gender issues. They were not places where women learned how gender insinuated itself differently into oppression or where women were allowed the freedom to raise, analyze and seek solutions for the concerns most relevant to them as women outside of patriarchal attitudes and pressures.

For despite its radical praxis, liberation theology has still failed to respond to the useless suffering of mothers and infants, two social groups abandoned by the rhetoric of empowerment and by the 'good news' of the social gospel of Jesus. On questions of sexuality and reproduction, it is the new church that is mute.12

Scheper-Hughes found that the issues of dire importance for women and their well-being surrounded their lack of control over their bodies affecting the form of social, economic and medical balance they could secure for themselves and their families. Without control over their bodies acknowledged as legitimate by social institutions, women's emancipation would always be compromised. And, the fact that the liberatory Church failed to attend to these issues

---

11 "Mandonal" refers to women who supposedly "control" the lives of their docile husbands a reversal of normative male/female relations.

12 Scheper-Hughes, p. 528.
demonstrates how fundamentally liberation theology was tied to the teachings of the institutional Church when it came to gender.

The emancipatory impulse of early CEBS sought to open new options for people whose lives were severely impaired by poverty. Originally theologians and delegates of the word drew on the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who suggested that literacy programs such as his could function as the impetus from which oppressed people would begin to campaign against injustices. The program implied an equalizing of all relations including that between teacher and student. Freire stated:

A revolutionary leadership must accordingly practice co-intentional education. Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge.13

The CEB adaptation of the Freirean model involved drawing meaning from biblical sources by relating what individuals read or heard to their own lives. The importance of understanding daily life was emphasized but within a framework of critically dissecting the dimensions of oppression.14

The premise associated with both Freire and liberatory CEBS, was to draw individuals away from acceptance of their position in life as fate, to considering their subordination as the result of social and economic injustices that if disputed would lead to their elimination.

13 Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, (New York: Continuum, 1990), p. 56. The critique of liberation theology I have made with its over-emphasis on class in the beginning and then later no discernible course of social analysis, its erasure of women and its binarisms is the same critique I would make of Freire's method -- the very method that liberation theologians used to develop their emancipatory project. For more on this see Jeanne Brady, "Critical literacy, feminism, and a politics of Representation," in Politics of Liberation: Paths from Freire, ed. Peter L. McLaren and Colin Lankshear (London: Routledge, 1994).

14 This did not however result in an analysis that undertook the task of deconstructing the category of gender.
Theoretically, the leader, as Freire proposed, was to function more as a facilitator of meetings than a merchant of knowledge, to "be a partner of the students." And as pastoral agents, priests and religious have often confirmed the learning experience was reciprocal as the poor brought new interpretations of the Bible and life itself to their attention. Gutiérrez, in The Power of the Poor in History, defined this as "two way evangelizing" which he described as a process through which "in seeking to bring the good news to the poor, one has a real experience of being evangelized by the poor themselves." Underlying the entire process was the design to persuade individuals to claim their full place in society as citizens of equal value to those whose economic and political means were greater.

CEBS appeared at a time when participation in the Church was suffering from a malaise of rigid dogma, apathy, poor attendance and a decreasing number of priests forced to cover larger geographical areas. "For centuries, religion stood as a bulwark for conservatism in this part of the world, and the Catholic Church remained firmly allied with elites opposed to change in the established order of things generally." CEBS were expected to revitalize the Church on the wane while obliging the institution to redirect its own gaze toward the structural injustice of poverty and violence. CEBS were to be what the institution decidedly had not been, supportive and encouraging of those marginalized. They were imagined as exemplars of justice in practice. They would be the physical and intellectual centres of progressive thinking as well as the true

15 Paulo Freire, p. 62.


realization of a Church vigorously on the side of the poor. Rigoberta Menchu understood well the polarities of the Church. She experienced the consequences of a Church removed from social reality against the work of the liberatory Church that attended to the needs of the community. Her testimony is a profound example of the changes that a liberatory thinking and practising Church made up of laity and clergy could have in altering the course of oppression.

There is the Church of the poor which is at war. We opted for the just war. In El Quiche many priests left the Church because they saw that this wasn't "communism", it was the people's just war. Christians realized that they needed an organisation, not only for the sake of having an organisation in the struggle, but also because it actually reflects the attitudes of the Christians who are fighting in the mountains today, motivated by their faith.\(^1\)

By practising justice amongst themselves they would set the stage for the rest of society to follow in their example.\(^2\) CEBS would carry the best of social activism from the secular world with the moralism and ethical impetus acquired from the institutional Church to make them a hybrid of both social movements and Church with Church holding the greater weight. The image, is not unlike the effigy of the hero dispersing the good news of liberation to those not yet versed in the possibilities. It was a utopian vision and expectation holding an arrogance of righteousness for being on the side of the right kind of justice. As one member of Ernesto Cardenal's CEB at Solentiname stated,

I don't think there are two kinds of justices, one of the community and another of God. If you don't beg pardon of the community, what other pardon can you get, if the community

---


\(^{2}\) As Guider points out, this attitude of being the exemplar of just piety did at times work against the growth of cebs. Members were inclined to be accepting of only certain visions of liberation or interpretations or indeed ideas for action.
is Christ himself..."20

Feminism has had the same conflictual reputation to deal with that sets expectations and rhetoric against evidence that severely tempers so called advancements. Feminists, to some extent, have participated in the maintenance of the status quo by not pushing debate into areas of serious political and social contention. A case in point is the issue of abortion for which many feminists in poorer countries or observers now conscious of their post-colonial position, contend is not a primary issue of concern. They have failed to see how this issue like many others becomes glossed over by the political and economic investments the state makes in motherhood.21 They ignore that in the case of abortion women die "as a result of illegal abortions or (who) are forced into abortion through a lack of contraception or the means to support more children ... in poor states or racialised minorities in rich states."22 Instead, the task of feminism should involve the exposure of elements in society often hidden from view that affect women because of their gender -- elements not often explained or considered by women or by the state. Jan Jindy Pettman explains this further in a quote describing the operating mechanisms of the state, but I would also include the Church:

All state [and Church] policies affect women, often in different ways from the ways they affect men. Women's experiences of citizenship, the labour market and state violence are different from men's. Only through feminist analysis or a 'gender sensitive lens' do these differences and therefore their full meaning of these


22 Pettman, p. 20.
institutions become clear.\textsuperscript{23}

Returning to the discussion of CEBS and women's place within them, undoubtedly women have required a place in which to explore the components of their lives that make living so complex without fear of reprisal or censure. CEBS did not become hotbeds of feminist discourse. There is no convincing evidence that demonstrates that women in great numbers adapted critical methods that led them to an analysis of gender and feminist praxis from within CEB sites although this is not to discount the increased awareness and skills in community issues of some women or the movement of others to specifically designed feminist groups external to the Church. The question then is why when women made up such a majority in terms of participation in CEBS did the discourse fail to lead to analyses of gender, or why if such debate was eclipsed did CEBS develop a reputation for being on the crest of new liberatory ideas and practice? The blame, in part, can be placed on the construction of CEBS, their process and the failure to account for dominating practices internally. CEBS for instance generally had a membership that was both female and male creating a problem in terms of how to diminish traditional ties to authority marked by gender -- a problem that was exacerbated by a lack of internal critique.\textsuperscript{24} Certainly, CEB attachment to the institutional Church and its unbending attitudes toward sexuality and gender did little to open a more critical approach to gender and race.

Catholic discourse compounds this problem by making women feel guilty about domestic conflict. For older women, the paradigm of the via crucis still reigns supreme....Conciliar theology offers scarcely more reassurance: calling upon people to take responsibility for

\textsuperscript{23} ibid, p. 13.

affliction, it views marital conflict as the fruit of the spouses' own wills.  

Finally the leaders of these groups came with their own socially and politically engrained attitudes on gender that often times fell into standard perceptions of liberation without attention to how systems affect women differently. CEBS, as the last twenty-five years have demonstrated, lack the intellectual and material autonomy that would enable them to engage in a critique that would certainly end in conflict with the institution that secures their existence. This lack of critique which would surely give rise to questions on why CEBS have been reluctant to delve into gender analysis is not fully the fault of the institution; some blame must be steered toward the theology that spurred CEBS' emancipatory incentives and the lack of commitment by theologians to gender analysis.

Within a cultural ideology that allows women little breadth of identity the way in which oppression functions is by assigning women the task of transferring the very value systems that oppress them to the next generation.  

Gloria Anzaldúa states that "Culture (read males) professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles." So while CEBS were useful at one time in defining the rights of all citizens in generalized terms they failed to account for how traditional gender templates that permeate into the daily routines of living

________________________________________

25 Burdick, p. 94.

26 Women have found a multitude of ways to survive that expand stereotypes; however there is a cultural depiction of women that continues to permeate all levels of human encounter accompanied by social evaluation.

27 Anzaldúa, p. 17.
curbing the attainment of women's rights is insinuated in the very notion of citizen.\textsuperscript{28}

Most CEBS (there were always exceptions) were not as radical as their reputation might suggest.\textsuperscript{29} They did not become vehicles for shattering culture's grasp on women's traditional roles in society.

Most significantly, despite its call for gender equality, liberationist Catholicism generally looks upon domestic issues as less pressing than the question of class oppression. As Sonia Alvarez has argued, liberation theologians see the solution to women's problems as lying in 'increasing their participation in the public world of politics and production,' rather than in dealing with the inequality present in the household.\textsuperscript{30}

In urban centres where CEBS generally had stronger institutional links autonomy of thought and practice through ensuing years may have become less negotiable. However, in rural areas where priests, bishops and pastoral agents had larger districts to serve, CEBS may have experienced a more fluid freedom to act politically particularly for land rights, but not necessarily in the development of gender and race analysis.\textsuperscript{31}

Scholars have been duplicitous in CEB stagnancy by negating the presence of gender injustices that thwart liberatory processes. Research in this area tends to be of one type only that disclaims the relevance of feminist critiques in the lives of poor women. This stance only varies in its justification. For instance, W.E. Hewitt assumes feminist analysis is redundant if, as his study indicates, women are assuming leadership roles in CEBS. Or, in the case of Madeleine Adriance,

\textsuperscript{28} Jeanne Brady, p. 143.


\textsuperscript{30} John Burdick, p. 94.

\textsuperscript{31} Madeleine Adriance, \textit{Opting for the Poor}, (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1986).
who in her analysis of CEBS in rural Brazil justified the absence of gender critique in her own work on the fact that the women she came in contact with in CEBS showed no interest in a gender analysis. Not mentioned by either of these scholars is liberation theology's central claim that knowledge must be developed about oppression and its function in an ongoing process of revelation. Many of the elements were and are new to participants. Therefore to base the absence of a particular analysis on "lack of interest" signals a continuation of androcentric practices at both a scholarly and community level. Hewitt's study neglects to mention that while women did lead their local comunidades in their own neighbourhoods few women are ever elected to represent their communities at other levels of CEB organization as John Burdick found in his study of CEBS in Brazil. Hewitt's lack of gender knowledge impedes him from questioning why it was that if women's membership outnumbered that of men's (and therefore logically they should assume a representative number of leadership positions) there were so few women participating at district and national levels of CEB organization or, why if discussions of pertinence to women were constrained by local priests, Hewitt believes the success of CEBS for women is greater than "feminists would admit." 

Hewitt bases his stance on the example of a woman, who as leader of her local CEB, strove to "revitalize" it by initiating programs for young people and women. Nonetheless, Hewitt is

---

32 Both Hewitt and Adriance level critiques at the work of Sonia Alvarez (see bibliography) who was looking not strictly at base communities but at Brazilian women during changing political times.

33 Burdick, p. 94.

34 Hewitt, p. 66.

35 ibid, p. 65.
unaware of his own blindness to the gender implications when he praises this woman for her efforts against the obstructions placed in her way that meant much of the work of the CEB was done not collectively as CEB methodology would have it, but through her solitary efforts. Indeed even discussion in groups was restrained by her local priest who feared "undesirable' or 'harmful' influences." In this case, emancipation is simply a discursive tool within the group and not evidence of liberatory praxis having penetrated the praxis of other members and certainly not to a level that would provide serious engagement in an analysis of gender or the role of authority in designating appropriate approaches and responses to materials. So while this individual is deserving of praise for her successes, her example does not secure adequate evidence that gender inequalities are being addressed in CEBS or that her success precipitates a gender liberation for herself or others.

Early in the history of liberation theology, theologians claimed their intent was to move oppressed peoples from what they saw as "passive" acknowledgment of the conditions of their lives to active resistance against the injustices. Certainly liberation theologians brought new ideas, new methods, new ways to analyze situations not only through the social sciences but through theology and a commitment to work in community against the continuation of

36 p. 65.
37 p. 65.
38 The issue of passivity is one that denies the complex ways in which individuals strive to arrange their lives to lessen the suffering incurred through these injustices. It also neglects the long histories of resistance throughout Latin America. On the other hand many people did articulate the oppression in their lives in terms of it being God's will. Liberation theologians sought to break this view and to encourage people to work in community against oppression and not in singular acts that fail to alter the systemic origins of oppression.
oppression. Adriance's position that lack of interest among women is why gender analysis has not been developed re-entrenches the legitimacy of passive responses while denying the prominent role intellectuals have had in introducing ideas in the past.

Material gains in land and political policy can be solidified only through a dense comprehension of how and why unjust systems operate. Certainly sexist attitudes and practices buttress these same systems and deserve analysis of equal standing. Liberatory CEBS were cultivated for the very reason of creating a new intellectual interpretation on conditions of suffering with full cognizance that learning would occur not only among those hoping for their own liberation but among the leadership as well. Still liberation theology maintained a patronizing attitude toward "the poor" demonstrating in fact how little theologians knew and understood the histories of peoples subjugated over the course of centuries to domination. In the following quote what is important is Gutiérrez's attitude which demonstrates his own urge to patronize a people he views only beginning to act as full human beings without accounting for the need of the oppressor whether it be the rich or the priest to change. Nor does he acknowledge that the subjugated have always been full human beings albeit ones blocked from access to participation in the society that dominates.

Gradually they are learning to speak without interpreters, to have their say directly to rediscover themselves, and to make the system feel their disquieting presence. They are becoming less and less an object of demagogy and manipulation, or an object of half-heartedly disguised 'social work,' and more and more the agents of their own history -- forgers of a radically different society.39

39 The Power of the Poor in History, p. 190. This quote is interesting for a number of reasons. It demonstrates the righteousness of much of liberatory rhetoric, its obfuscation of identity, and its rather patronizing attitude when referring to the "poor" while at the same time demonstrating liberation theology's commitment to people speaking for themselves, constructing their own identities and acting politically against unjust systems. All these elements are important in
This notion of reciprocal learning implied that there were gaps in knowledge regardless of a participating individual's social position (meaning either a leader or a member). Scholars and theologians who deny the importance of employing a gender analysis by presenting weak evidence of either the non-existence of discriminatory practices or a lack of interest are simply by their own passivity supporting the status quo as it currently exists.

The paucity of work done on women's presence in CEBS epitomises the piecemeal quality of work done in the area of gender analysis by those examining the development of CEBS. Oppression and liberation are placed into broad categories much in the same fashion that Gutiérrez did in his work, negating the specificity of individuals' lives or the insidious fashion in which attitudes on race and gender censure full membership among a majority of citizens. John Burdick, although more attentive to women's participation than either Hewitt or Adriance, dismisses the importance of a gender analysis on the grounds that there are five times the number of women involved in pentecostal churches.40 The question of the relevance of a gender analysis is not meant to be caught in an argument of comparative volume, but on how better to understand women's participation and the coordinating aims of a liberative theology. The question ought to be "how gender influences the nature of participation, collective practice or the meaning of action."41 The examination of social movements, or in this case a theology that rests its status on asserting the right to freedom for all oppressed peoples, must include an assessment of how the understanding first, why gender was not addressed and secondly, why gender could and should have been integrated into its methodology and analysis.

40 Burdick, p. 7.

theoretical claims and subsequent practice correspond to the expressed ideals of the theology for specific actors. Leaders of social movements and theorists, while disclaiming oppression in all its forms, in contradictory fashion, have failed to push the emancipatory discourse further. Too little attention has been paid to how domination asserts its power on the cultural mechanisms that function to exclude people because of their race, gender and class.42

Liberation theologians claimed that through a process of revealing how oppression functioned in their own lives people would seek the means to end unjust relations with those around them. A number of questions arise from this. How might such a transformation appear without having undertaken a gender analysis and whether or not so called liberatory successes can be sustained outside the confines of the CEB or for what length of time under social and political shifts and pressures? Without shifting the evaluation of CEB success from the number of infrastructural projects to assessing how cultural attitudes and practices have been altered CEBs remain a project orientated vehicle with little sustaining affect on the larger community that continues to reproduce hegemonic practices.

While the image of CEBS is one of independence, in actual practice CEBS rely on official statements from the Church such as the following and use them as a rallying cry for legitimating their work.

The evangelical mission of the Church demands that we announce here and now the Good News of the liberation of everyone, so that all men [sic] may commit themselves to participation in the action of God in the world, recognizing Christ as Lord of the Universe.43

The euphoria of what CEBS could be and what they could achieve converged in the work of liberation theologians who tended to idealize the pure but shackled poor who must and would liberate themselves. Confining the rhetoric to phrases such as "the poor" negated the subjectivity of those whose lives were being represented in the work of theologians. And while these theologians spoke and wrote about "the poor" emancipating themselves, they made little attempt to acknowledge who the poor might be or what they might be saying about their own lives or indeed about their faith. The tone and the framework was a decidedly androcentric and homogenizing one based on a male conception of liberation, revolution and method in the history of great heroes like Simon Bolivar or Che Guevara.

Well, we should be clear that the New Man of the revolution and the New Man of salvation are two different things: one is political and the other spiritual... And we need a political New Man, because there has been a change in the ways of doing things. The old system was very corrupt, and the rich used it to exploit the poor people. The humble people can now achieve some dignity in this life, and that is new. This is just. It is right. This is a better way of doing things, and I would even say that it is a more Christian way of doing things than through the rule of money and force.

---

43 Catalina Romero, p. 270. This quote is important for its language and form that clearly designates men as the frontrunners of the movement. It is another example of the heroic if not utopic form that eludes women's political and social experience. Women, as this chapter argues, were not emancipated by this process. The discourse and the restraints of the church hierarchy and priests did not integrate a gender analysis that could consider how women might become politicized. The format, as this quote suggests is clearly androcentric.


45 The publications of Ernesto Cardenal of the discourses around biblical passages at CEBS in Solentiname, Nicaragua would be an exception to the problem of theologians and priests speaking for oppressed peoples.

46 This is a protestant example of heroism. Roger N. Lancaster, Thanks to God and the Revolution: Popular Religion and Class Consciousness in the New Nicaragua (New York:
And as Ileana Rodriguez writes,

The masculine is dedicated to consecrated male ideas that men have attributed to men -- Gallegos and Rivera (Guiraldes), Cabezas, Borge (El Che) -- Founding Fathers of the Americanist tradition in one case and of revolutionary Latin American letters in the second. They are made to speak for a continent -- a unit larger than the nation, the vast geography across which men bond, weld, and lock gender solidarity within male-dominated epistemes. 

Those theologians, like Gustavo Gutiérrez, who have published extensive treatises on liberation theology have failed to mark where real people are inserted into their works or where the poor have changed their thinking on God or the practice of Christianity. By not identifying these changes, theologians like Gutiérrez demonstrate not the reciprocity of the process they promote but the vanguardist type of method that implode a set category of criteria on the groups by which they must operate in order to establish themselves as legitimate. By not noting how individuals have impacted the liberatory thinking of professional theologians, the process erodes both in purpose and in practice. The impression that is left with the outsider gazing in is that liberation is limited to the "poor" in a secular context and not to the "sacred" world of the theologian or the Church despite disclaimers of those working in the field.

Certainly, theologians had looked at the work of social scientists and the failure of development theories to understand better how the so called "first world" had imposed itself on the "third world" in ways that affected the capacity of the poor to eke out a meagre survival. Within this disclosure of how the lives of the poor had been affected by the policies of


international negotiations and economics, liberation theologians raised the stature of the poor from being "ignorants" impeding development to an image that even when not directly stated implied they were the carriers of an essential Christian identity of greater purity than others. The utopian notions of who people were (including the theologians themselves in terms of their relationship to the institution and to CEBS) and how society could be altered evaded the complexities of a reality that were never completely unveiled under what in the end was a discourse with unfortunate limitations.\(^48\)

The lack of attention to who people are is carried into the work of CEBS that have ignored largely the difficulties of gender and race in cultural and institutional practices. CEBS appear not to have addressed the issues that make women's participation in mixed gender groups problematic particularly in an institution that uses their services but allots them no authority to speak or decide on theological or administrative policies. Women, for example can be uncomfortable and therefore silent in the presence of men. And although they are supposedly members of equal standing to the men in the CEB they are expected to assume their traditional roles by preparing food and cleaning up after the meetings.\(^49\) The responsibility of children makes consistent attendance at meetings difficult rendering women unable to meet the demands set by the CEB. The result that women are being evaluated as less than committed members, this rather than the group seeking accommodation or understanding of how women and children are linked in society. And since CEB structure is grounded on reading, some women are unable to participate at the same level as others whose literacy competence is greater. For these women there is a sense of

\(^{48}\) Burdick, p. 69.

\(^{49}\) ibid, p. 69.
being less capable, less knowledgeable. Burdick observed,

In the *comunidad*, then, despite the claim that all members are equal, those who read well or articulate the new orthodoxy clearly in public are more equal than others. If one is illiterate, the chances of becoming a Minister of the Eucharist, a Bible-circle coordinator, or any other sort of leader are slim indeed. One illiterate woman, who was appointed by Father Cosme to the council but could not endure the refusal of other council members to treat her as an equal, eventually resigned.  

These issues that imbue women's lives with insecurity around their personal worth are founded in traditional notions of appropriate behaviour and value while simultaneously they bar many from being more integrated participants. The tenuous form of women's participation in CEBS is reminiscent of Ileana Rodriguez's statement that women are delegated responsibilities or duties and are only permitted "rebellion" when such action is granted by the group.

Rarely acknowledged is how authority has played a key factor in the degree of democracy permitted within CEBS. For many women it meant belonging to groups where males as the leaders or the dominant spokespersons by their presence and the threat of judgement made it difficult for women to articulate the struggles they encountered in their domestic relationships. "Liberation theology's assumption that the smaller the group the more natural its solidarity and mutual good will [be] quite simply flies in the face of the tension-ridden, gossip-prone reality of neighbourhood and kin relations." The presence of men and their interpretation or solution to domestic violence often coming from within a male directorate in the Church limited how women could speak about their lives. Contrary to the image of CEBS of being democratic, non

---

50 ibid, p. 77.
51 Rodriguez, p. 43.
52 Burdick, p. 92.
authoritarian groups, authority, whether in the guise of gender, race or class may have served to silence any intention to raise contentious issues. Those who were silenced or silenced themselves may only have been accepted as marginal participants. Silence in this sense has two functions. The first operates where participants are encouraged to learn the content, method and responses required from those who have graduated to the level of liberatory leaders but not to add to the repertoire. And secondly, the type of silencing that ensues when participants realize their opinions run counter to the mainstream and therefore in order to remain in the group and be accepted as members choose to censure themselves. In Gutiérrez's work authority is not discussed in how it might function amongst liberatory groups to arrest freedom of thought and therefore the right to speak by those not given a public forum in which to discuss their ideas. For those who because of their gender, their race (the degree of darkness in their skin), their class, are subject to the authority of the group, the result of their vulnerable standing in society marks them as less vital members (or members who are merely tolerated). 53

Since gender and race were not dealt with productively at the theoretical level it stands that such issues were never effectively incorporated into political action or how CEBS themselves functioned. The absence of praxis in this area combined with the pressures exerted by the Vatican on theologians and CEBS alike to redress their so called radical theological interpretations, weakened not only the political imperative of CEBS but any intention they might have had to probe more independently into the complex symptoms of injustice.

53 Burdick, pp. 224-225. Poverty must be understood in its gradations. The poorest of the poor are not given prominence in CEBS for example and are often alienated by the small group size of CEBs that because of their size measure one another by their material wealth. Burdick, p. 72, and W.E. Hewitt, p. 87.
The link between CEBS and the institutional Church has changed as CEBS grew more reliant on the institution for material resources and religious legitimacy. It is difficult to determine if this merging of institutional resources with CEB emancipatory method and analysis was the result of institutional pressure or mere acceptance by priests, bishops, religious and delegates of the word who saw no reason to believe that such materials would limit analysis. Nevertheless had CEBS pushed harder for establishing autonomy in thought and practice from the institution assuredly the result would have been a disciplinary one from Rome with the reassignment of priests judged too radical and therefore dangerous to the stability of the Church's authority the result of which was seen throughout Latin America once John Paul II came to the papacy. CEB survival was dependent on support received from the institution. Gender discussions outside the parameters of the Vatican's own deliberations would have severely challenged CEB stability.

With the institutional Church's refusal to admit its own discriminatory practices "the agency and availability of the Church as an instrument of salvation and liberation is not only limited but frequently compromised." With the institutional Church's refusal to admit its own discriminatory practices "the agency and availability of the Church as an instrument of salvation and liberation is not only limited but frequently compromised."

The current state of affairs for CEBS sits in disappointing contrast to the hope they inspired in the early 1970s. At that time, liberation theologians were issuing strongly worded critiques on injustice meant to be heard by the Church and society. They labelled injustices which previously had been dismissed as simply the unfortunate natural unfolding of life itself insinuating that the

---

54 Burdick, p. 77.

55 Mainwaring, p. 182.

injustices resulted not from the manipulation of systems by those in power but by the human frailties of those caught as the victims. To contradict this homogenizing of guilt theologians impressed on people who had been economically, politically and culturally marginalized that their suffering was not the fault of any innate human flaw nor God's will but the result of larger unjust systems and historical processes. This in itself was a major intellectual and cultural shift. Theologians fought to have the lives of the marginalized told in such a refrain that would bring a new and more just interpretation to society's attention. While this is where liberation theology began its development the process ossified, the result of a complexity of factors predicated on the presence of authoritarianism, racism, classism and sexism that became as Foucault contended diffused "throughout a multiplicity of sites" invisible to many because of its (power's) assumption to the stature of legitimate knowledge.

A process that began with the intention to liberate theology and concurrently people by defining more idealistic yet realizable notions of salvation and liberation in the end may have led to an intolerance of the ideas and methods of others considered less insightful than core members regardless of how benevolent the intentions might have been. John Burdick and Margaret Guider both observed in CEBS a movement to exclude those marked as different because of class (and therefore holding less legitimacy in terms of their knowledge), race and gender. While this seems opposed to liberation theology's foundational principles it is an example of how in fact the

57 Archbishop Romero made it a point in his weekly sermons to correct the official versions of the state on horrific violations of human rights that were rampant in El Salvador at that time.

58 Klor de Alva, p. 69.

59 Burdick, p. 224.
power/knowledge apparatuses insinuate themselves into practices at every level of human existence unless critique is persistently integrated into the process. Burdick, as an example, found that CEB members unable to repeat the emancipatory discourse according to the standards of the core members were devalued.

Here the importance of articulateness and literacy looms large. Leaders in the Bible groups reward with warm responses articulate reproductions of progressive discourse. Despite claims that 'everyone has a say' in the circles, in fact far from everyone does. Those who feel unsure of their verbal skills or who 'do not know enough' are strongly inhibited from speaking up. In the meetings I [Burdick] attended, the majority of participants remained silent while leaders and the most articulate members dominated both the reading and commentary.\(^6^0\)

W.E. Hewitt's study of CEBS among more middle class populations in Brazil found a high turnover of membership making it difficult to even assess whether or not a group fit whatever effusive definition of a CEB existed.\(^6^1\) He found that the turnover often resulted from a frustration on the part generally of women and young people who felt their ideas and aims were not being given serious consideration. Guider discusses the competition for resources and attention in the Catholic Church that often sidelines those issues that affect those marked as outside the Church and by a Church that instead of including those marginalized, "sets out to solve...['the problem'] in accord with its own understanding of the divine commission."\(^6^2\) The elitism found in CEBS only epitomizes the profound embeddedness of authoritarian rule in Latin America. Theologians have not fully considered the extent to which "inegalitarian and elitist"

\(^{60}\) ibid, p. 195.

\(^{61}\) W.E. Hewitt describes the "heterogeneity" of CEBs that adds to the complexity of assuming that all CEBS are liberatory or have indeed similar methods or aims. pp. 45-50.

\(^{62}\) Margaret Eletta Guider, p. 152.
practices have been imbued into daily life or how this infects the potential of liberatory ideals.63

At a theological level, liberation theologians were asking parishioners to reconceptualize their notions of Jesus into a form that may have seemed strange, uncomfortable and perhaps not entirely sustainable. Jesus, in the early work of Gutiérrez, is portrayed as the "liberator" walking alongside of the poor as opposed to the "lawgiver, the judge who orients...[them] in ...[their] quest for salvation".64 Guider has suggested that these theological shifts are unlikely to establish roots in the lives of the poor as long as the institutional Church continues to function as the prime legitimating force in values and theology in their lives. The image of Jesus as a compatriot sits in uncomfortable contrast to a doctrine based on a hierarchy of power. Entirely new orientations, according to Guider, in how the Church might establish its own practices exempt from domination must emerge before theological innovations can be proposed and gain wide acceptance at both a clerical and popular level.65 In a struggle between CEB legitimacy of theological innovation and Vatican authority, the Vatican is likely to win the advantage as the source of "real" knowledge.66 Those who are the most radical and willing to risk will find CEBS too restraining, and those who remain committed to CEBS as they are today may just as easily find themselves willing to look to the institution for confirmation of beliefs. The current state of affairs within the papacy would imply that alternatives that would dramatically disrupt the course of the Church and its present

63 Mainwaring, p. 185.
64 Rowan Ireland, "Catholic Base Communities: Specialist Groups and the Deepening of Democracy in Brazil." in Mainwaring, p. 234.
65 Guider, p. 142.
66 Guider, p. 142.
position to the world are unlikely to materialize.\textsuperscript{67}

The rise in protestantism and perhaps the real malaise about the Catholic Church forecloses the possibility for any large concerted effort to democratize the Church from within.\textsuperscript{68} The place where contestation logically could have emerged was through CEBS and yet without the critique that would push discursive practices into more acute analyses and the lack of support from leaders like Gutiérrez, that type of opposition has yet to materialize. In fact the real challenge to the Catholic Church is no longer CEBS or liberation theology but the rise of protestantism that might be in part a response to the disillusionment Latin Americans feel with the Catholic Church.

The 1970s represented CEBS most innovative and daring period. Many functioned as training grounds for those who would continue in secular social movements to fight for economic and political justice although many found that they were better trained for conciliation rather than "confrontation."\textsuperscript{69} Few CEBS however, have been able to sustain this early impetus or to advance their own theoretical and practical inclinations. Intervening years narrowed analytical prerogatives to produce a generation of CEB members skilled in liberatory rhetoric but perhaps on the whole not well versed in its meaning or the possibilities for its use.

\textsuperscript{67} ibid, p. 169.

\textsuperscript{68} I am not suggesting in its entirety that a malaise in terms of the Catholic Church allowed in full the rise of protestantism. The issue is a complex one. For further information see Burdick's descriptions of why individuals are attracted to Protestant sects, often because the Catholic Church has marginalized them, or has not been able to aid them in addressing pressing personal problems. A fuller account of the growth of protestantism is found in David Stoll's \textit{Is Latin America Turning Protestant?: The Politics of Evangelical Growth} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), \textit{Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America} ed. Virginia Garrard-Burnett and David Stoll (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993)

\textsuperscript{69} Burdick, p. 200.
Gutiérrez's Shift in the Defining Features of CEBS and the Impact for Women's Liberation

Through their early period most works written on CEBS struggled with definitions. They deliberated over what would constitute a liberatory CEB and not a Bible group or some other Church adjunct falling under the larger category of a social ministry mandate. Many groups considered themselves CEBS and yet followed no discernable social action program. Gutiérrez holds to the claim that CEBS are and always have been spiritually based groups active in internal discussions instead of the politically rancorous groups that their international reputation had implied. His comments allow for a definition that scatters liberatory aims within CEBS opening the way for groups to claim any and all their activities as emancipatory without establishing a finely tooled critique to assess CEB practices. In the end, what Gutiérrez's reference permits is CEBS' existence within the institution with little conflict.

The broad definition designed by Gutiérrez frees the way for apolitical CEBS to flourish particularly as his own work loses its political edge leaving CEBS with few authoritative sources to claim in support for their activism. As such, CEBS will have a much reduced reason to examine their own structure or development under issues of domination. With no leadership in activism aside from individuals within a particular group, as Gutiérrez has done in his own work,

---

70 There is little agreement even on the number of CEBS in Latin America or indeed what constitutes a CEB. Daniel Levine in *Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism* details these conflicts through comparisons. See his definition of CEBS pp. 12-13.

71 Levine, p. 45.

72 This idea of being spiritually based groups also has differing meanings according to Gutiérrez's own shift in the meaning of spirituality that went from one of political and social responsibility to one of almost mystic proportions in terms of individual union with the divine.
there is less of an incentive or a legitimacy for CEBS to search out non-church related resources that could provide alternative views on the apparatuses that maintain oppressive power in the society in which they live. The impulse is greater to trust institutional interpretations on issues of race and gender rather than taking the more independent course of exploring the work of secular scholars. These are indicators that CEBS in all likelihood have become more integrated into the institution whereas once they were lauded as the instrument through which the Church would find itself dramatically altered. If thinking in CEBS has changed so also must the meaning attached to their activities which might be more aligned with the charity work of the traditional Church or advocating for the infrastructural needs of the community as opposed to dealing with the issues that sustain inequalities.

Gutiérrez's shift to a benign form of CEB development sits as an antithesis to his earlier work that emphasized the importance of assuring continuity between theory and practice. In those works, liberation theology's validation was contingent on how liberatory ideals were enacted in the experiences of people's lives. Since the writing of the first edition of *A Theology of Liberation* the emphasis has moved from collective action that can elicit strife in political terms to individual conversion and spirituality that bespeaks a more defused climate. The shift to spirituality is probably a return to a more comfortable configuration in that it avoids conflict from within the group by members who wanted a more traditional connection to theology and from the institutional Church that desired a less politicized constituency. Regardless, the shift does reflect the ways in which liberation theology never fully penetrated members' lives. Liberation theology brought Jesus from a distant context of divinity to emphasizing his full humanity on earth in a very specific setting of poverty and disparity. The godly aspect was not eliminated nor ignored but
subdued in order to underscore Jesus' comprehension of the essence of despair by those most marginalized. It was a way in which liberation theologians could justify political action. Emphasizing the proximity and physicality of Jesus was premised on the idea of stirring the poor to move from passive acceptance of their lives to outrage at the injustices. This stance coaxes participants to work toward change in their communities by contesting the inequalities through appeals to Biblical sources.

Jesus advises them to break with their families, with their circle of rich people, with their class. And the fact that they invite the poor to the party means that the poor stop being poor, and that in society everything is shared equally: health, clothing, culture. Because a party with crippled, sick, ignorant people isn't a very good party.  

With the shift from community outrage of the despair to one of spirituality as the centre point, Jesus' human status is less vital as the locus around which to construct a politicized theology. The collective becomes an obsolete dimension aside from religious discussions or the need at various moments to organize projects. The shift is from collective liberation based on Jesus' own suffering and continued presence to individual spiritual liberatory piety and charity as opposed to strident efforts to alter the systems that lead to desperately poor conditions.

In this CEB return to a more overtly religious focus than the political one that caused CEBS identity difficulties, they reconfirm the Church's authority in religious interpretation. This is where the term "base" in CEB loses its emancipatory weight. Previously, liberation theologians had used "base" to underscore the laity. In other words, those normally excluded from the arena of theological development. Base also referred to those whose economic means were minimal.


74 Burdick, p. 211. Burdick provides a useful example of the Church's "paternalism -- a tendency to abandon any movement it cannot dominate or engineer...."
Within its meaning base was as much a statement on the injustices of class as it was on exclusionary practices that stemmed from elitist notions of knowledge. Now CEBS turn to the institution for theological and social direction to legitimate their own thoughts and actions as opposed to exploring and legitimating their own knowledge basis -- the foundation on which liberation was thought to arise. The act of autonomously arriving at political and theological positions was, in those early years, considered an act of subversion against hegemonic practices of power/knowledge. As the quote below demonstrates the reality of so many years of thinking they were engaged in emancipation comes to a dramatic disclosure by an emancipatory priest who realizes the extent to which knowledge was designed by others suggesting that the role of leaders never altered from being one of imposing "correct" thinking and praxis to one of equal reciprocity.

We are witnessing a crisis in the euphoria we once had. Over the past twenty years, the one who has been producing the discourse has not been the people. The one who 'chose for the poor' was not the poor, it was us, the pastoral agents. The more we recognize that the discourse is our own, the more honest we will be....The more we say 'participation' the more they distance themselves from us. The pentecostals are much more attractive to the Catholic masses than are our CEBS.\footnote{Burdick quoting the local progressive priest, p. 222.}

The history of CEB development would confirm this as well especially noting the reluctance of early CEBS, to enter into the political fray during military dictatorships. They were diffident participants forced into action when social movements could no longer publicly contest the repressive activities of governments. Nonetheless once CEBS began politicizing themselves many became the birthplaces for people who then sought out more militant forms of confrontation in secular social movements. Even so, CEBS may not have been the spaces were sustained political
action could be secured because of their strong links to an institution uneasy about independent forms of political action from within its own ranks. Joseph Comblin has also suggested that CEBS "adopt[ed] the language of the pastoral agents, but passively resist[ed] their calls to action."76 So their purpose and value was limited to their discursive practices and the short term project driven activities they took on. They were effective in creating a level of public consciousness on issues of poverty and violence as well as in training members how to perceive and act on eliminating domination. CEBS had both the political and religious commitment to carry out their activities as well as to live as individuals dedicated to implementing justice in their own lives.

Even though there are remarkable stories of heroism attached to CEBS, the vision of a just society that was the hallmark of CEB activism has withered in political realization as CEBS focus more on themselves or support systems that make life palatable but are a panacea to the origins of disparity and power inequities. A new society was bound to elude CEBS as long as the Church continued its blockade against pressures for it to dispense with its dominating and exclusionary practices or its evaluative processes that silence those in its employment who threaten the institution's authority.77 CEB vision for a more just society was also bound to fail as long as the analysis continued to see power being dispersed in a top down fashion and not as emanating throughout society permeating the very breaches of private and public spheres.

Women have sustained CEBS and yet there is little that advances their own position that

76 Burdick, p. 6.

77 Here I am thinking of the liberation theologian Leonardo Boff who was silenced for a year for his critique of unjust practices in the Church and who has since left his order. Guider also compares the Church to the life of a prostitute. pp. 168-169.
would recognize how sex discrimination conditions even their participation in emancipatory leaning groups. To fight for feminist principles is to risk derision from the group or even expulsion from a Church intolerant of feminist analysis. Instead women rely on an institution that is decidedly androcentric to define their needs and their understanding of gender. The Church will continue to encourage projects women have created that aid families in feeding one another but will not sanction activities that move outside the parameters of what the institution deems as appropriate female virtues and strengths. The charity work of women in CEBS coincides neatly with to the image the Church has of women as caring mothers not simply for their families but for the entire community.

...the communal kitchens and other new forms of local organization did not succeed in changing the way in which these women valued their potential as citizens or as dynamic agents of change in their own communities. Their mobilization did not give them political weight in the exercise of power, except where they were directly involved. Nor, I believe, has participation brought about a new awareness of women's gender identity.  

The problem, as Barrig describes it in her study of social movements, is that women under these (creating soup kitchens etc.) conditions can only deal with "immediate problems", not the causes, the solutions or, the state's "inefficient distribution" of power and resources. Women "struggle for better conditions of life for their loved ones, without as yet organizing themselves as a social and political force which demands a change in their subordinate status in daily life and in

---


79 Barrig, p. 136.
women's work."

How a "politically empowering self" for women might emerge in a context where their oppression has been studied from a vantage of biological determinism is unclear. In many respects, traditional identities for women are simply reinforced by concentrating on spirituality as opposed to focusing on deconstructing the mechanisms and attitudes that limit their lives. Unfortunately sacrifice and martyrdom are the two strongest features by which women gauge the validity of their existence. In suffering, as Mary suffered for her son, women have learned to comprehend their own existence. This symbol of suffering held as a virtue to which one aspires or taken as a statement on its indubitable presence, leaves little room for human frailty. If these are the strongest cultural and religious features on which to predicate women's identity, women's participation in religious institutions is not surprising nor is their compliance to the structures that call on them to be faithful adherents. Piety that sacrifices one's own needs for others is imbued in the most heroic examples of faithful Christians but even more specifically it is the way expected of women in a culture supported by Church and state ideology that vigilantly oversees their moral choices. Women are invited into emancipatory groups but are not emancipated themselves from the duties contained in traditional modes of expectation. They are expected to do the work of emancipation while only to be emancipated themselves within the boundaries set by androcentric ideologies, that correlate to the standards for womanhood established by males.

80 Blondet, p. 45.

81 Grewal, Scattered Hegemonies. p.244

We also know, however, that it was toward this space [the private sphere of family life, reproduction of labour and the species] the place of useless energies, that the maximum social repression was directed by means of discourses - religious, scientific, and juridical -- that established the standards of morality, mental health, and normality for the woman, seen as the pillar of the family, which was in turn seen as the basic unit of bourgeois family.83

The task of extracting oneself from patriarchy is immense considering how the collusion of Church and state over centuries has firmly installed discriminatory practices within culture itself obscuring the ways in which sexism functions in the daily operations of living. The emancipatory project if limited to a structure of historically patriarchical dimensions will simply be, to quote Alarcon, a "parody of the masculine subject of consciousness."84

Understanding Women's Marginalization in CEBS through a History of Domination and Resistance

The Conquest holds piercing mythic status in the history of Latin America. It symbolizes the role of women in the development of a labour force that would establish privileged lines between peoples. Black and indigenous women were inducted into service by becoming the producers of an underclass that would work the plantations and later the factories as peons while Spanish and Portuguese women were imported in order to preserve the "purity" of the colonial leadership.85 Whiteness was and is to a certain extent even today, symbolic of beauty and goodness translated

83 Raquel Olea, "Feminism Modern or Postmodern?" in The Postmodern Debate in Latin America p. 194.

84 Alarcon, "The Theoretical Subject(s) of This Bridge Called My Back and the Anglo-American Feminism," in Making Face, Making Soul, Haciendo Caras. p. 337.

85 Guider, p. 44.
in society as those, by virtue of these "qualities" most legitimately suited to rule.86 The white woman represented culture, order and purity; the indigenous woman in contrast was the savage seductress who could ruin her own (La malinche) race and that of the colonizer (the creation of the mestizo population).87 Throughout literature beauty is an attribute of whiteness. The admiration of white women as superior to colored women is clear in the textual privilege granted to her, even though beauty is politically qualified... 88

Society assigned women emotive qualities particularly in the realm of religious expression while denying them the faculties of reason or rationalization. In the seventeenth century women discovered mysticism, giving those who took on this role of a mystic a new found freedom outside the normative strictures of society. Here, initially to the surprise of the Church women could explore their religiosity within the parameters of female expression (emotive) and could free themselves from the entanglements of family while earning some stature for themselves in the larger community.89 Complete freedom was not possible, much like the development of the CEB movement where the Church moved to control the content of CEBS. So here too in the case of mystics, the Church in Latin America moved to be the final arbitrator of institutionally approved and therefore authentic mystical experiences.

Access to power depended on the ability to read and write. And for many women formal education was denied them so mystics generally relied on oral transmissions. Sor written

86 Franco, Plotting Women, p. 20.
87 For more on this see Ana Castillo, Gloria Anzaldúa and María Lugones.
88 Rodriguez, p. 44.
89 Franco, p. xiv.
accounts of their experiences, the expertise of others had to be garnered. Women mystics were consistently denied greater legitimacy (or access) within the institutional hierarchy by virtue of their gender that implied by Church standards a reduced faculty in the field of rational thought. As Jean Franco states, "Knowledge and superstition, and it was again the writing that policed those boundaries at the other side of which were the motley beliefs of orally transmitted culture."\(^\text{90}\)

Mystics may have initially created an alternative form of religious expression, but it was the Church that moved to bring such expression under its control while continuing to deny that women were capable of reason. Sor Juana de Inés' life is an early historical example of women's resistance and the type of restrictions placed on women that disallowed them access to hierarchies of knowledge. She entered the monastery in Mexico in 1666 purposely so that she might pursue a life of learning. She read, wrote and argued theological doctrine for which she suffered condemnation from the Church hierarchy.

...in literary forms she gave to her insatiable, gender-conscious, intellectual curiosity. Sor Juana was passionately inquisitive about empirically observed phenomena and cognizant of the changing relationship of human beings to their environment that marked the dawning of the scientific age.\(^\text{91}\)

She wrote disparagingly but with wit on why women were forbidden from higher learning or why it was assumed women lacked the capacity to reason. As she wrote in a famous piece contesting the critiques of her confessor,

\(^{90}\) Franco, p. xvi.

And so just is this distinction that not only women, who are held to be so incompetent, but also men, who simply because they are men think themselves wise, are to be prohibited from the interpretation of the Sacred Word, save when they are most learned, virtuous, of amenable intellect and inclined to the good....For there are many who study only to become ignorant, especially those of arrogant, restless, and prideful spirits, fond of innovation in the Law (the very thing that rejects all innovation).  

Sor Juana could render logic a new twist outside the parameters of traditional thought undermining the so called logic of normative beliefs. Jean Franco argues that Sor Juana's form of subversive resistance holds more empowering features for women than the emotive, other worldly expression of the mystics. The question Franco raises between the examples of Sor Juana and the mystics is not superfluous to twentieth century questions of women in CEBS. First it demonstrates the layered centuries of subordination forced upon women by institutions, and secondly, it is a reminder that while women find venues of contestation, they are not necessarily outside the reaches of institutional or societal control and are often reconfirming on some level of the status quo. Forms of subversion, resistance or simply creativity may catch the institution initially unguarded but historically the Catholic Church has proven itself adept at gathering its resources to render a potential threat into an advantage. The Church does this by broadening its theological parameters and methods enough to make itself palatable to those who have disputed its narrowness but without incurring substantive change to its core. It then offers its resources in space, knowledge and legitimacy to make it more conducive to those straying from its centre of control. Mystics, like female CEB leaders have lacked the cultural authority and access to

---

92 Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, p. 81.

93 ibid, pp. xv -xvi.

94 Franco, p. 20.
resources that could deepen their knowledge on how oppressive apparatuses hold women in subordinate objectified positions in society. The example of the mystics does demonstrate, however, the continued creativity of women to search out spaces that "deviate" from the "roles defined by the church and state." Nonetheless, this creativity of women to find "subversive" spaces can not compensate, as Nancy Miller states, for the overwhelming influence on the lives of women of all classes of the Catholic Church from the colonial period to the present. The Church's complicity in this process is central. Not only did it buttress state policies on gender, it also made itself indispensable in the rituals that confirmed daily living. Through "conversion, and in the rituals of life, through baptism, confirmation, marriage, [and] burial" the Church marked the conduct of each individual's life.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought about major changes for the Church and for the Americas seeking independence from colonial ties. With independence, nation constructing began. Liberal discourse appeared to include the social and civil rights of all citizens, and yet once again, women were unequivocally excluded from the debate. The ideological construct of nation that was to bond all citizens to one another in a common "brotherhood" to defend borders flatly prohibited women from participation. To account for women's intentional exclusion from the sphere of state, the home was raised to symbolic status. Liberal ideology, having made


96 Miller, p. 27.

97 ibid, p. 27.

women extraneous to political life, conceived of home as a metaphor for the well being of the
nation as a whole becoming a mirror on which the nation would judge its moral and political
health.

The liberal debates at the time were blind to their own internal contradictions that left women
subordinated once more. On the surface the process of nation building relied on the virtues of
liberty and justice in an effort to distance themselves from the domineering vertical structure of
colonial times founded in a "divinely - ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm". Boundaries were
established, sovereignty upheld, and fraternity by virtue of similarity encouraged amongst all
citizens (read male) to inspire allegiance in the event of war. What nationhood did not envision
is how women might be included in this notion of "brotherhood" aside from their role in the
biological sustenance of future generations. Regardless of the universality of liberalism's universal
rhetoric, women were denied the right to be the "interpreter[s] of their own will" while being
burdened ideologically with the well-being of the entire nation.

Now as the twentieth century draws to a close and after generations of being submitted to an
ideology of subordination Latin American women have developed practices that make them
simultaneously "internationalist and often anti-nationalist." Women have had to look beyond
their own borders to find financial support for projects to feed their families, or to secure political

---

99 Mary Louise Pratt, "Women, Literature, and National Brotherhood," in Women, Culture
and Politics in Latin America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), quoting Benedict
Anderson, p. 49.

100 Pratt, again quoting Anderson, p. 49.

101 Olae quoting Celia Amoros, p. 194.

102 Pratt, p. 52.
backing in their struggles to have human rights abuses acknowledged in national and international corridors. In doing so they have found themselves disparaging the legitimacy of elected governments that falsely use the symbol of "motherhood" to defend the state's governing policies.

The rallying cry of "nation" has been used by both democratic building regimes and dictatorships to propose a vision of society that excludes women's input and their full participation at all levels of society. Stability in the home is imagined as a stabilizing factor in the security of the nation. While attempts to move from the home to the world of work is noted with suspicion and judgement. This, in spite of the reality that women have always worked often supporting families without a male partner. The dichotomy between the imagined reality of identities and roles and the actual lives of individuals is vast as women are and were called upon to safeguard a nation that worked against the very virtues established by the rhetoric of what motherhood stood for.  

In actuality, as Feijoo remarks, "the glorification of mothers as part of our 'national tradition' has more to do with folklore than reality."  

Women's mobilization has traditionally occurred over issues that directly affect them. In the nineteenth century, mobilization began coalescing under the rigorous "domestication" policies that had resulted with the construction of liberal states. Journals, magazines and pamphlets focusing on women, often written by women, were used as a vehicle through which women's identity was solidified but where their concerns also could be publicized.  

103 Masiello, p. 29.
105 Miller, p. 44.
women's lives was the growing apprehension in the education of young girls. This concern was voiced by female teachers who had first hand knowledge of how pedagogy was used to promote (under the auspices of the Catholic Church) an image of "femaleness" that cohered to ruling social and cultural expectations.\textsuperscript{106}

The late nineteenth century also saw the development of the feminist movement that through into the middle of the next century fought for women's right to vote as full citizens. The problem with feminism and other forms of women's mobilization was how these groups tended to gather around specific issues as opposed to an analysis that examined the causes of women's subordination in areas outside of legal jurisdictions. With the absence of a substantive analysis there lacked a sustained movement against the oppression of women that could be carried beyond the victories of education and the vote into the sphere of culture and politics that would bridge all classes. Feminism, after securing the vote for women seemed to slip into oblivion where it remained until the 1960s before emerging in a new guise and fighting for legitimacy from both the right and left of the political sphere.\textsuperscript{107}

Movements from the left complained that feminism was destroying the unity necessary to combat the sophisticated machinery of the government. The focus, the left argued, must not be

\textsuperscript{106} ibid, p. 35.

\textsuperscript{107} Here I am not suggesting no women were fighting for the rights of women, in fact there were. The Argentinean writer Alfonsina Storni was such a woman, but movements as such could not be sustained ideologically or probably physically to contest the mechanisms of women's oppression. See "Alfonsina Storni: The Tradition of the Feminine Subject," in Women, Culture and Politics in Latin America Seminar on Feminism and Culture in Latin America, Emilie Bergman et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). See also Women's Writing in Latin America: An Anthology, ed. Sara Castro-Klaren, Sylvia Molloy, Beatriz Sarlo (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991).
splintered into sectarian demands but be based on the implementation of universal human rights from which women's rights would automatically be included although not defined necessarily. The left assumed that all human rights abuses were identical and that those obviously of a more gender specific nature like spousal violence were the result of the pressures wrought by a system that sought to demean men economically. The systematic repression of the 1960s and 1970s made it difficult for feminists to create an agenda of their own without incurring the reputation of being reactionaries fighting against the struggle for justice. The problem that feminists discerned had historical precedence in nationalism debates of the nineteenth century that subsumed women's rights and roles in society under the category of "man". Feminists were faced with the dilemma of either trying to urge the left to conduct a deeper analysis on women's oppression or seek autonomy in order to advance their work without internal restraints.\textsuperscript{108} Among feminists this quandary was never adequately resolved. In leftist movements women felt that change could only result if they remained within their organizations although they were assigned persistently subordinate positions in their political cells as they pushed for an analysis on gender and race.\textsuperscript{109} Male party loyalists denounced feminism as a bourgeois import and assured women that a successful revolution would bring about a radically new political landscape for women. Feminism was described as a neo-colonial strategy designed and imported by privileged North American and European women ignorant of the realities of Latin America. This put feminists in Latin America in the precarious position of having to defend their position by employing the rhetoric of


\textsuperscript{109} Miller, p. 187.
nationalism even when it contravened their feminist principles. In the end feminists faced two opponents. To their political right, women were struggling against authoritarian governments notorious for the use of the symbol of "motherhood" as a rallying cry for defending a particular notion of nation manipulated to restrict social and civil rights. And, to their left, women faced *companeros* who talked about human rights in broad terms but who refused to engage in an indepth analysis of women's subordination.

During the 1970s and 1980s two strains of women's groups emerged: one definitively self-proclaiming feminist and the other made up of women but not holding to any feminist label. Maxine Molyneux in her work on women's mobilization developed a theoretical distinction in order to apprehend the differing aims and bases of these two strains of women's mobilization. She makes the distinction in terms of how women theorize about their lives and what practical form they take in projects. The first category in Molyneux's schema is the strategic gender interests of feminists. The second category incorporates the practical gender interests of women who are most visibly active in projects to aid other women and their families whose survival links are particularly precarious or, in the improvement of the infrastructure in their communities.¹¹⁰

Strategic gender interests are deductively ascertained by reviewing the areas in which women, because of their gender, are subjected to domination and alienation. The analysis in not left as theory; women here seek to have changes made at a political level in national and local governments.¹¹¹ In contrast, practical gender interests are "inductively" claimed, according to


¹¹¹ Molyneux, p. 232.
Molyneux, emerging from women's labour position as distinct culturally, socially and economically from men. These are practical interests, in that they surface from the marginal conditions in which women find themselves living and seek to address immediate relief but not necessarily by changing the system that creates the unjust distribution of material resources. Women are motivated to unify to contest the elements that threaten the survival of their families and their capacity to fulfil their roles as mothers against a state that has ignored the structural and institutional obstacles that endanger the well being of families.\textsuperscript{112} Women in these groups focus on projects that bring food to their communities or potable water systems. Their lives are often modified substantially by their mobilization as they experience the mechanisms of power and economics in their petitions for aid from local and international agencies and governments.\textsuperscript{113}

Molyneux's categorizations have come under critique by feminists in recent years who see it as "universalizing" the oppression of women as well as creating a hierarchy that suggests that the work of feminists is superior to the work of women in the "practical interests" category of women's mobilization. Marianne Marchand correctly notes that the distinction in strains of mobilization fails to record the political engagement of women working for survival issues.\textsuperscript{114} The critique captures the construct of yet more dualities that women must battle. Molyneux has created the idea of an advanced feminist or "modern woman" against the problematic and less

\textsuperscript{112} ibid, p. 233.


advanced poor Latin American woman unable to lobby intellectually or politically for better conditions on her own behalf. As in the work of Gutiérrez and Freire, Marchand fears that new universals have been created by Molyneux's categorizations that demean the complex lives of women involved. The distinction categorizes all women in "either/or" condition eluding the diversity found among women, their lives and the interpretations they each hold to understand their subordination. While I see value in this critique, I hesitate to discard Molyneux's categories entirely since they have the capacity to elucidate the links to systems of domination that theories without concern about the differences in women's mobilization can not clarify. To not include a debate on the issue of feminism or its absence in some groups is to reify all actions and practices as being liberatory when in fact they elide issues of domination. Once again the problem of self-reflexive critique is paramount. Those in positions of privilege must "witness not only the destruction of the wall [privileged domination] but that of her own anonymous inscription on that very wall." Jean Franco also writes,

The woman intellectual cannot claim unproblematically to represent women and be their voice but she can broaden the terms of political debate by redefining sovereignty and by using privilege to destroy privilege.

Finally, all groups regardless of their class or gender must be aware of the precariousness of their liberatory actions. As Roger Lancaster so cryptically assesses, "Many who imagine themselves to be raging the tradition are actually only reproducing it in the confines of a new

---

115 Marchand, p. 63.


117 Franco, p. 80.
organizational structure; the disrupted graveyard yields up to its very real ghosts."\(^{118}\)

Women from both positions must recognize how their differing positions afford them specific forms of contestation and knowledge but, that the two must work in partnership to establish a more accurate analytical and theoretical base on which to arrive at workable and relevant political projects. Molyneux's distinction is only a variation of others that exist in the work of Latin American theorists like Barrig, Blondet and Jaquette who use terms like "survival strategies" in social movements that organize often spontaneously over specific issues but not on sustained ideological principles.\(^{119}\) In all quarters, critique to assess the emancipatory potential and effectiveness of groups is essential to prevent the replicating of new forms of domination or to overcome already existent ones.

A primary component of the work of feminists and women in social movements has been to raise the profile of daily life as a category of analysis particularly as women strive to bring material changes to their communities. Unfortunately, politicians and social theorists have derided these attempts by rejecting "daily life" as a category worthy of analysis or an impetus for social change.\(^{120}\) Not to incorporate daily life as Elizabeth Jelin states, is not to have comprehended that the examination of the conditions of daily life can alter dramatically the mode of political activism.

Women, whether participating in churches or in politics, have not only chosen but been forced


\(^{119}\) Barrig, p. 115.

to move outside of the normative parameters to secure for themselves and their communities spaces where oppression, in whatever form it takes, has less of a hold in its thrust to limit lives. As boundaries are breached new definitions of who women are and can be, as Ruth Behar says, outside the traditional categories of "mothers, wives, activists, 'beasts of burden" surface. Instead, when considering identity from a new, more flexible but critical perspective on gender women can recognize themselves as "thinkers, cosmologists, creators of worlds."122

There are, as Ruth Behar describes, women who have created their own categories, ones set outside of all normative strictures, challenging how society has known women up until that time. The issue of survival compels people to seek new and more ways of establishing livelihoods -- complex and innovative strategies also outside of the traditional patterns of labour. Arturo Escobar's description of Latin America articulates the type of culture that defies linearity of thought or historical progressivism.

...cultural and economic forms of different temporal origins coexist, forming layers rather than stages, constituting at the same time simultaneity and sequence. This simultaneity of time and cultural form is undoubtedly best captured by writers and artists, through aesthetic - mythic modes such as magical realism.123

Escobar's description explains why Behar's push to widen feminist definitions is logical in light of the complexity found in Latin America. Although, it seems unnecessary to impose a label where in fact no label is necessary aside from the need on the part of society in general as well as feminism to understand and validate the diversity of lives among women. The task of feminism is

---

121 Escobar, p. 77.
123 ibid, p. 67. Culture in this sense is "(made of) people's practices." See Escobar p. 70.
to recognize the survival strategies of women but to probe to levels that disperse the concealment of causes that have led women to struggle as they do while constructing programs to their elimination.

The Question of Critique in CEBS and Women's Emancipation

Any and all emancipatory programs must continually assess themselves. A critical assessment is not meant to discount the work of emancipatory groups but to push the discourse and the potential for further action and consciousness into areas not yet explored, or in need of further exploration with the addition of new interpretations. The same could be said for Ruth Behar's investigation into the life of a marginal Mexican woman named Esperanza who as a strongly independent woman, has striven to construct for herself a life not controlled by social dictums.124 Even so, Esperanza's life is limited by the poverty she survives and the culture she lives in that renders judgement on herself and her children for her lack of conformity. Alone she is not changing social perceptions of women or making it more possible for women to seek similar solutions. The "successes" are hers alone and not transferable to others. She enacts the feminist principle of self definition but does so without any recourse to a more equitable life. On this feminism must be clearer by avoiding the reification of the efforts of singular women without assessing the value outside those actions or rather why those actions are not initiating change

124 This is not strictly a piece of testimonial writing although much of this text is in Esperanza's own words. Ruth Behar Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993). It is however, an important account of one woman's life and the difficulties of representation.
elsewhere. In the words of bell hooks, "I want people to advocate feminism as a politics."125 If the hope is to eliminate the oppression of suffering for all people the process must include the oppression of women. Advocating internal changes as Gutiérrez has done in his shift to spirituality allows only acts by individuals distant from social action. These are lifestyle changes. Feminism, like the impulses of the earlier rendering of liberation theology, is the act of doing in a politically conscious sense.126

CEBS are not sublimated units detached from the cultural ties that become imbued at the level of relationships. Rather, CEBS embody all the contradictions and complexities found in society. They engage in secular activities and yet claim religious foundations; they present themselves as autonomous ideologically and yet are contained to a rigid hierarchical institution; and, most while having a large female constituency are androcentric in practice. Can feminism realistically expect Catholic women to extract themselves physically and emotionally from an identity imposed over the course of centuries from within the very institution which promoted that identity? Without feminism how can women know how to establish identities not tied to traditional dictates of the "good woman" when their survival, or for that matter all they have ever known is linked socially, economically and politically to that ideal.

Women's dominant membership in CEBS is both interesting and puzzling. Puzzling because of the extent to which women continue to be marginalized in the Church in spite of their gender dominance. An exclusion that operates even at the level of a supposed emancipatory program.


126 hooks, p. 941.
The mystery of why more critical thought and action has not emerged from CEBS resides in the institution's insistence on justifying women's subordination by reminding women that Jesus was male. Jesus' sex illogically becomes the source from which women's virtues and own religious callings are established. Thus justifying that women because of their reproductive capacities are more suited to the rearing of children than to the demands of the priesthood.

Access to centres of influence and power have been denied women through an ideology preached in the Church and made politically legitimate by a state that evaluated women through their role as nurturers. In recent decades, the difficulty in raising families has been exacerbated as more and more women find themselves the sole economic supports of their families. The recourse available for poor women under such circumstances is severely hampered often leading to their further oppression at the hands of employers. They are forced into the underground economy or into work as domestics that pay little and rob them often of the right to their own bodies. When no work can be found women must hope neighbours and extended family members will provide them with assistance.

Women who must economically support their children find themselves confronted with conflicting moral messages. Their responsibility is to care for the well being of their family so as not to tax the resources of the government or hamper the vision of a cohesive nation with little or no resources to fulfil this massive goal. This persistent relegation to a mythical notion of mother means that women are denied entrance into political, economic and religious debates even as those very debates affect their lives directly. The risk all women take should they publicly

contest, as the Mothers of Plazo de Mayo learned is a marginalization that codifies them as *locas*, or women out of control intent on destroying the basis on which society is constructed. It is only as women become collectively *locas* that public attention is paid to their voices.\(^{128}\) The distinction between public and private and the application of this distinction to the lives of women while artificially invented, have left many women reluctant to engage in political activity seeing it as "soiled" work better suited to male natures. Women in CEBS and other social justice groups but secular in nature also express this same sentiment seeing themselves as unsuited to the competition and dishonesty they glean as necessary in the act of politicking. Instead they prefer to set up aid programs in their local neighbourhoods. This distaste for politics by some women is reasonable in light of the brutal realities they live as a result of political structures and policies. But, such reticence to secure new paths of doing politics may be more ingrained in the centuries of exclusion women have experienced from the public sphere and from this a lack of confidence or seeming know how to articulate their ideas and needs in a space dominated by men in a cultural ideology where women deemed "good" if they acquiesce to male authority.

In mixed gender groups like CEBS, women, until they are comfortable to do otherwise, are often silent as men take the platform. Even the most emancipatory vigilant groups often view women with suspicion expecting them to weaken as political demands are increased. The vigilance with which women are scrutinised is aimed at assessing the extent to which women maintain their traditional female trappings -- the abandonment of these traits is a sign that women have become a threat to the group, to institutions and to the security of the nation. Like the

\(^{128}\) *"Locas"* Means "crazy women" not an uncommon label directed at women who dare to be different.
Mothers of Plaza del Mayo in Argentina who defiantly sought answers to the whereabouts of their disappeared children by using their "motherhood" to register political and vociferous dissent against the state and its acts of terrorism while suffering incrimination and assassination.\textsuperscript{129} Their act to claim their children on one level coincided with their duties as mothers, but their act to contest the state was judged an act of subversion. Revolutionary movements are not so different from repressive governments (although the repercussions are markedly different) in their vigilance of women's identities. In the case of \textit{Tania La Guerrillera} (Haydee Tamara Bunke Bider), an Argentinean woman who joined with Che Guevara to fight in Bolivia, her status was only established when she took on the role of cooking and sewing for her comrades shifting her from the potential traitor/seductress to a trusted \textit{companera}.\textsuperscript{130} Describing in such broad terms the extent of women's oppression and the obstacles they needed to overcome internally and externally in the world to succeed as politicized women cognizant of gender and sex issues is meant to offset how little CEBS were able to accomplish collectively for women throughout Latin America. I am not suggesting that individuals did not gain ground on a personalized emancipation but I am suggesting that the strands of oppression that are particular to women and perpetuated by both genders never came under the mandate of CEBS as items worthy of examining or eliminating.

Early assessments that lavished praise on CEBS seem to emanate more from the potential of liberatory discourse than from actual results under which I would add sustained successes that

\textsuperscript{129} Miller, p. 11.

\textsuperscript{130} ibid., p. 165.
become entrenched in processes and behaviours over a period of time. Extending the liberatory analysis and the form of activism from within a conservative leaning Church has been CEB and liberation theology's greatest albatross and in the end their greatest opponent. CEBS and liberation theologians neglected to impose a critique directed at examining the type of links they had to the institution that might obstruct their work toward a more liberating program for all participants or one that would clarify the conditions of their commitments. The line of demarcation in terms of where the discourse and the form of appropriate activity for these groups could advance certainly became concurrently more apparent and limited with Rome's assertion of its authority into the local dioceses throughout Latin America.

Although slow to respond initially, CEBS did seem to explode onto the political scene in the 1970s. They had a real and vital role to play as military governments ruthlessly attempted to shut down social movements. The meaning attached to their activities was obvious and allowed

---

131 McGovern, p. 198-199. Theologians and those supporting liberation theology in the beginning were the most uncritical supporters of CEBS. Even Gutiérrez said at Puebla that the "future of CEBS was more important than liberation theology itself." (McGovern, p. 15). McGovern notes the euphoria but continues by detailing how varied CEBS are and few in number when examined in terms of actual population. Their emancipatory impetus is of course varied, as well, some have arisen from the institution and some from grass roots developments.

132 Where in Brazil the CEB movement was actively taken up by the hierarchy in places like Argentina the Church hierarchy was active in the terrors of the military government. See Martin Edwin Andersen, Dossier Secreto: Argentina's Desaparecidos and the Myth of the "Dirty War", (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993). In cases like El Salvador where the Church hierarchy was divided, it was CEBS that took on the activism of the Church under the support of a few progressive priests and bishops like Romero, Rutilio Grande and Rivera y Damas. In Colombia the hierarchy and its conservatism are well known with the likes of Trujillo who moved to control the political activism of CEBS. See Daniel Levine's Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism. In Nicaragua, the CEB movement evolved from a splintered hierarchy through progressive priests at the grass roots level although at the time of the revolution the Church was able to unite itself with even Bishop Obando y Bravo (later contesting the Sandinistas) supporting the cause of Samosa's downfall. However it was the work of CEBS with supportive priests that
them to move in united form against the clear betrayal of human rights by the government. When democracy emerged the political meaning behind CEB commitment wavered. In the past, CEBS were imagined as the intellectual nuclei from which individuals could examine their faith and the content of their social lives within a larger rubric of social responsibility. These small units of socially responsible Christians had access to a methodology that could engender skills in analysis and provide individuals with the confidence to speak publicly about injustices although it seems that the structure of the groups (i.e. links to the Church) dictated issues of value.

Democracy shifted the playing field by seeming to render certain labels and identities superfluous. The need to define oneself as a leftist, or a revolutionary, as a subversive, or even more broad terms such as the "the poor" and the "the oppressed" became obsolete in a political arena of a plurality of contesting political aims and actors. Divisions resulted as movements held together to contest the military government now had little in common with one another. In this new field of plurality, politicians had to learn the art of vying for the votes of particular sectors including women. Although,

Politicians cannot move easily beyond rhetoric, they do not understand women except in their role as voters. When the time comes for proposals, all candidates recycle old ideas.133

Old ideas or simple rhetoric did not result in radically new emphases on the oppression of women. In some countries, like Brazil where the feminist movement was well developed democracy offered an aperture through which women sought to insert a feminist mandate that resulted in a

________________________

at many junctures helped to rejuvenate oppositional calls.

133 Feijó in Jaquette, p. 83.
government position dedicated to women's issues. Even so, as Julieta Kirkwood, a Chilean feminist who died prior to seeing her own country become democratic, observed, life for Latin American women is undeniably subject to authoritarian (patriarchal) rule that embeds itself not only in state and religious institutions and systems but well into the designations of home. Therefore if democracy is to be successful it must move from stabilizing political institutions to transforming the private lives of women and men in the exercise of daily life. "Thus, democratization for women has come to mean the democratization of daily life, self-determination, autonomy, and freedom from violence and oppression." The problem remains that the spaces in which women might assert their independence are limited by processes tied to political and religious powers that practice authoritarian methods more than democratic ones raising additional barriers for women who have neither the time nor the energy for yet other battles in their daily struggle to secure the resources for their families. And, as Sharon Welch warns, the gains women do make in political and religious realms are vulnerable to shifting tides of powers.


136 Maruja Barrig, "The Difficult Equilibrium Between Bread and Roses: Women's Organizations the Transition from Dictatorship to Democracy in Peru," in Jaquette, p. 124. Sharon Welch in Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation, (p. 31) asserts a similar premise. Women must be careful not to assume that gains are carved in stone, such gains can be easily lost when political winds change.
Democracy, as Sonia Alvarez has observed, has failed to meet the expectations of those caught in poverty. The inadequacy of democracy's ability to fulfill the hopes of people could have directed liberation theologians commitment to the need for contestory movements like the CEBS envisioned in the early 1970s that fermented their dedication on collective political action. The attention, in the 1980s was inverted into the type of individualism found in the practice of spirituality.\textsuperscript{137} By attending to the infrastructural needs of the community rather than the causes of oppression, programs become susceptible to the changing tides of political investment when not forced into the policies and economics of larger institutions that wield power.\textsuperscript{138} Barrig proposes a new relationship between women's strategic and practical interests by interlinking them and employing the skills of women in the areas where they have the most influence.\textsuperscript{139} In this case the needs and causes of problems are defined by both groups and the strategies for dealing with the problems are brought forward so as not to be competing for political attention but working in unison for change. By drawing on the expertise of the two strands of women's mobilisation, practical interests based on securing food, or potable water avoid being sequestered by androcentric institutions (i.e. the Church) that refrain from entering into an analysis of the function of power and knowledge in relation to women, and strategic interests of feminists do not forget the substance of their analysis or support. Feijoó maintains, the union of strategic and practical


\textsuperscript{138} Barrig, p. 124. See also Scott Mainwaring, The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil, 1916-1985 (Stanford University Press, 1986) and Sonia Alvarez Engendering Democracy in Brazil.

\textsuperscript{139} ibid, p. 132.
interests is vital to keep issues that draw on motherhood from falling into traditional patterns of analysis that "reinforce old behaviours."

As much as liberatory priests, nuns, delegates of the Word, bishops, and theologians claim the people at the base have taught them more about theology and liberation, the voices of the poor, especially of poor women are resoundingly absent from public view whether it be in theological conferences, or published papers and monographs. The silence comes from a process that brought a particular language of liberation to people and not the reverse contrary to the way in which CEBS have been depicted. A primary case is that of a women's sewing group in a Church in Sao Paulo Brazil where as women became more interested in talking about reproductive control, spousal violence, as well as their roles in family and society they found themselves threatened with eviction from the Church by a liberatory priest. When a dissident element in the group attempted to establish itself as an autonomous association the women discovered they were marginalized in the community and without the material resources to continue. They had lost not only the means to persevere in their programs but the legitimacy with which to do so.

The attitude found in the androcentric practices of social movements, Church and state has been one that places the emphasis on the practical interests of women and not on the underlining social and cultural ties that impose obstacles for women in accomplishing the tasks of daily life or beyond. For women in CEBS much of the problem coalesces in the actual structure of CEBS that obstructs their potential participation at the level of discussing the details of their lives. The

---

140 Feijóo in Jaquette, p. 88.

mixed gender structure that may appear a trite critique in fact amplifies how difficult it is for women to encounter spaces in which to develop a discourse that attends to the specifics of their lives without having those issues subsumed under an androcentric mandate. In Guider's study of prostitutes in Brazil she found,

that regardless of whether the prostitute is cast as a nonbeliever, sinner, or victim, the church recognizes her as a woman and ministers to her in accord with a particular set of ecclesial assumptions regarding the essential nature of woman as well as her role and function within the church and society.... Because of these assumptions, the agency and availability of the church as an instrument of salvation and liberation is not only limited but frequently compromised.¹⁴²

The struggle women must mount to attain intellectual and cultural autonomy will be massive should they decide to remain linked to CEBS. The Church remains firm (even the progressive elements) in its resistance to feminist aims particularly around reproductive issues. Within social movements, the Church has been adept at countering feminist influence by emphasizing women's practical interests to avoid relinquishing ground on women's biological prerogative.¹⁴³ In addressing liberation, or its failure for women, Sharon Welch reminds the Church that its part in the reduction of women's roles and their overall subordination in society has much to do with its exercise of power¹⁴⁴ and how it consistently fails to take into account the ways in which human rights are violated differently because of gender and race.¹⁴⁵ In the end, what the Church does and has done for centuries (as CEBS do currently) is "define the liberatory hopes for others" through


¹⁴⁴ Welch, p. 85.

¹⁴⁵ ibid, p. 79.
its own moral objectives for the world.\textsuperscript{146}

Research into Christian Base Communities reveals nothing new about or for women. Gender is largely ignored or placed in terms that suspend feminist theory. John Burdick and Margaret Guider come the closest to suggesting that CEB experiences may not advance women's emancipation as women. Burdick's study, while not specifically on women in CEBS, is the first of its kind to observe critically the interplay of class, gender and race on emancipatory projects. He looks at the function of authority, the viability and success of projects, and delves into relationships within CEBS that contain discussions to realities not of participants' own. Through this he discerns who is excluded or included or, for that matter, what forms of discussion and actions are given prominence. Critics of his work have charged he fails to acknowledge individual successes. His point, nonetheless, is to demonstrate the complexity of CEB relationships and how liberation for the community as a whole at a level that would influence institutions, is stymied by a lack of attention to gender and race that are implicitly related to class and ultimately issues of authority.

Burdick believes women's potential emancipation was preempted from the beginning through the actual structure of groups he studied in Brazil. Each CEB was organized by the priest according to members' home addresses therefore one met with those individuals with whom they were in daily contact.\textsuperscript{147} The lack of anonymity for women in these groups impeded their willingness to speak about their lives particularly the abuse they suffered from their spouses. They worried that neighbours would pass information onto others including extended family

\textsuperscript{146} p. 83.

\textsuperscript{147} Burdick, pp. 87ff.
members, fearing critical judgements that would circulate eventually back to their husbands. And because relationships were already secured outside the auspices of CEB meetings the likelihood of altering behaviour with those individuals was decreased. Anonymity affords the potential of creating new identities when working with people with whom individuals have no history. The structure itself had precluded the emergence of certain discourses that might have led to methods that could open new opportunities for women to alter their physical and social well being.

While the combination of leadership and authority is problematic in most group situations, it is more so for women who are expected to abide by traditional female stereotypes. Women are less free to speak about their lives, their suffering and the obstacles society hurls on them in a group where men are present. Add to this the question of race and class and what seems to occur is a woman further marginalized by virtue of her darker skin and fewer material possessions.

The vulnerable position women hold in mixed gender groups combined with the cultural pressure to follow the directives of a male hierarchy may account in part for why women who choose to remain within the Church tend to attach themselves to projects that fall within the culturally appropriate boundaries of motherhood and family. Women are the primary organizers of milk and food programs, and daycare centres to aid poorer families. The programs are precariously balanced under the heading of motherhood where they exist without threat to cultural values as long as women remain outside of political lobbying and within the parameters of acceptable female behaviour. These programs, as valuable as they are, not only do not address the deeper problems in society but they relinquish the government of responsibility. And, while women may learn new ways of organizing themselves or advocating for their programs they generally do not learn more about sexism, its causes, to what extent it exists in their daily lives nor
how to battle it within the political sphere. The sewing group in Sao Paulo and Burdick's observations demonstrate the gravity of creating space that will invite discussion, not restrict it. Any structure designed for women's emancipation should be free of all elements that might render women silent on those life experiences that hinder their ability to provide for themselves and their families. Having an opportunity in a safe location to speak about what women know as unjust may open the venue to creating programs and projects to combat those injustices. This begins the process of linking practical and strategic interests. From this, women can engage in the political lobbying of local and national governments to force legislative changes. Clearly though, legislative changes are not bound to occur unless women demand them, and demanding them is not likely to occur unless women can find the intellectual and material space, as well as the acceptance in which to understand the undergirdings of their oppression without reprisal.

Liberation theology's contradictions are best and most visibly viewed in CEBS. This theology has called for internal liberation but seems not to mean an internal review of the exclusionary practices that would illuminate gender disparities particularly if it invokes a summons to the validity of Church doctrine and authority. Therefore CEB focus has been more on generalized notions of human rights to be attended to in the secular world without causing serious threat to the Church or their own survival. In the testimony Don't be Afraid Gringo, Elvia Alvarado chronicles her life of social activism which began, like many Latin Americans, through Church affiliated programs. The difficulty she found eventually, as have many women, was the restrictive nature of the CEB when new ideas and programs are introduced that challenge the parameters put in place by the Church particularly in the arena of gender. "They wanted us to give food out to malnourished mothers and children, but they didn't want us to question why we were
malnourished to begin with."148 Whether it is liberatory or conservative in the case of gender the Church functions to censure the discourse in efforts to contain women's activism to areas within the traditional mandate of women's role in society.

Burdick also noted that when issues like spousal abuse were raised they were done so from an institutional level. The contrived format of issuing pamphlets for discussions did not afford women the atmosphere of openness or security with which to discuss in full their own experiences. Feminist theory has long submitted that the vehicle through which women gain greater awareness on their own lives is through critically reflecting on their experiences.149 At an individual level, Burdick noted that women suffering from abuse received more concrete support from evangelical and spiritist movements (although not feminist) than from CEBS or the Catholic Church.

The Church maintains control by establishing itself as the source of all legitimate moral and theological knowledge. It integrated itself into the CEB movement through the dispersal of mimeographed material used by pastoral agents to engage groups in discussion. The method was dependent on the level of literacy among participants and since in Latin America, the poorest are often the ones who are least able to read and of these women are in the majority, these are the individuals ironically most needing support in emancipation but who often find themselves marginalized in CEB participation. For those who felt marginalized by their extenuating poverty


149 This same tenet was held by liberation theology in the beginning but obviously not sufficiently extended or sustained in groups around the discussion of gender injustices.
or by their inability to read the materials provided, CEBS were not the means through which their liberation was likely to occur. Even for those who were literate, the materials themselves were often written in a language that obscured their meaning. Nonetheless, liberatory rhetoric, like liturgical responses in the Church, had been learned well enough not to cause undue conflict in searching out the correct response. The CEB in some ways is only a microcosm of the larger Church experience with the same uniform content and structure. What a deeper analysis does is cause discomfort as individuals begin to comprehend their part in the processes that maintain unjust relations. But more than this opens the method to a greater diversity of ideas and analysis.

The means through which the structure of CEBS limits or expands questions of emancipation is also predicated on the role of leadership. Much of the success of a CEB's longevity or the content of its activity is based on the quality of the person charged with facilitating discussions and activities. The priest, religious, bishop or even lay leaders all have varying degrees of influence on how the group is organized around issues and activities as well as its internal functioning. If the leaders or organizing individuals who support the foundational creation of the CEB are "progressive" actions can elicit dramatic local changes as people gather to contest the injustices in their neighbourhoods. If leaders tend toward a more conservative ideological

\[150\] Burdick, p. 77.

\[151\] This is not universally agreed on by researchers. Some like Adriance contest Burdick and Brunneau and even to some extent Levine who acknowledge to varying degrees the importance of authority in the functioning of CEBS. Adriance contends that CEBS also function from the bottom up -- with participants generating discourse, interpretation and action. She does not seem to account for the complexity of relationships nor the impulse of the Church to maintain intellectual authority over CEBS. So while there are always groups and individuals who break the mould more often than not CEBS maintain the status quo not only within the Church but externally to it as well especially in democratic times.
view that supports a vertical hierarchy establishing the priest or bishop as the only legitimate interpreter of God's wishes, then the direction of the CEB will be drastically different if not stagnant in terms of political commitment.¹⁵² Within this spectrum of extremes CEBS come in a wide variety of attributes and forms.¹⁵³ And while one CEB may have been progressive (although even the standards of what might constitute "progressive" is contentious) with the addition of new members, a different political climate, and new Church leadership, CEBS can find their ideological basis dramatically altered.

¹⁵² There are such a wide variety of progressive and conservative individuals and programs. Regardless, both progressive and conservative priests have been poor at knowing how to embark on a fruitful analysis of gender.

¹⁵³ Levine, p. 45.
Chapter Four

The Alternative: Latin American and Latina Feminist Theologies

The masculine is dedicated to consecrated male ideas that men have attributed to men - Gallegos, and Rivera (Guiraldes), Cabezas, Borge (El Che) - Founding Fathers of the Americanist tradition in one case and of revolutionary Latin American letters in the second. They are made to speak for the continent - a unit larger than the nation, the vast geography across which men bond, weld, and lock gender solidarity within male - dominated epistemes. The Americanist traditions of the novel of the land and of guerrilla literature, at both ends, openings and closings, fulfil similar functions in cementing the state.¹

The male hero in the form of the guerrillero, the oligarch, the priest, and the general are the figures that dominate the cultural landscape of Latin America. They have assumed symbolic status in the history of Latin America as the source of power that as political motives change and ideological imperatives gain or lose authority, shift from being heroes to villains and vice versa. As male figures they hold the authority to configure notions of nationhood from within the institutions or movements that represent their interests and then carry these notions in compelling and convincing ways to their constituents. In constructing nation they wield their authority much like the historical caudillo or the patron of local communities who designate, depending on their ideological and cultural motives, the roles and identities for those under their intellectual or military command.²

Women are writing theology, just as they are also practising new rituals and ways of being that


conflict with fundamental notions of religion, freedom, God, and morality found in both the traditional Church and among its liberatory wing of clerics. And yet, women continue to struggle to have their ideas, work and practices given legitimacy by the institution, by publishing houses and by their male colleagues. In response to these issues and to the problems encountered in Gutiérrez's work particularly in this last decade, this chapter examines some of the ideas of several Latin American and Latina feminist theologians whose innovations push the epistemological grounding in theology in new directions, focusing on as Cherrie Moraga says, the "flesh" of women's experiences in community in contrast to the vision of being saved by a heroic figure who frames the category of their liberation for them. By rooting their focus in the actual lives of real individuals, the feminist theologians I cover in this chapter are attempting to rid theology of its "heroic" venture to create a homogenized recipe of liberation or Christian meaning for all believers. Among the more radical feminist theologians there is less of a reliance or concern for institutional methods and declarations and for some, less of a preoccupation for establishing the Bible at the core of theological invention. Instead they rotate the theological paradigm and concentrate on women's ideas, their interpretations of the world, and how they know their own lives. These theologians account for the complete realm of human experience, rejecting the binaries that lead to sterilized templates limiting in the end people's lives because of their differences. Theirs is an impulse to address the reality of human living in a fashion that reflects


that reality rather than creating a utopian image and aim distant from the multitudinous expanse of experience.

Nevertheless, as Paula Moya warns, having experienced oppression does not guarantee homogeneity of understanding among oppressed women nor can it possibly presume that all women will discern the manner in which oppression is linked to "hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality [that] operate to uphold existing regimes of power in our society." In Moya's "realist theory of identity" she contends that individuals do not hold the same "accuracy in interpreting experience," a skill dependent on the concentrated effort of learning to critique the "social, political, economic and epistemic consequences of our own social location." Although women understand their oppression in ways different from one another and differently from their own selves at the junctures of new social contexts, Moya insists that the sole venue through which a more accurate reckoning of the world will result is through "oppositional struggle".

Feminist theologians and the women in their communities stand in opposition to the normative theological endeavours of males in a patriarchal structure. The nature of their work demands that as feminist theologians they are obliged to contest the androcentric and misogynist elements that permeate both theology and religious practice. Their underlying motive is not obedience to the Church but liberation for women and men in a society exempt of oppressive hierarchies. As this chapter details, the trajectories that Latin American and Latina feminist theologians have chosen both in Latin America and as immigrants in the United States are diverse often reflecting the

5 Moya, p. 136.
6 ibid, pp. 137-138.
7 p. 140.
tenors of their own struggles that demonstrate the degree of difficulty in maintaining "oppositional struggle" without losing sight of the importance of women's emancipation from all forms of patriarchy. This struggle to be both feminist and a theologian has had the effect of causing two major divisions among women working in the field. The division is determined perhaps in part by the women themselves but more assuredly through the culture that judges what María José Rosaldo Nunes distinguishes as the so called "good feminism" of those women who offer "a gentle criti[que] of ecclesial institutions" and whose work can be easily "assimilated by traditional theology" against the women who adhere to a purportedly "bad feminism" seen as a judgement against men in its unrelenting "preoccup[ation] with problems involving sexuality, reproduction or violence against women."8 Rosaldo Nunes perceives the hidden aspects of patriarchy at work with the women who choose to adapt their work to the mainstream fearing to do otherwise will place the few advancements they have secured in peril.9 And rather than engaging in the production of new material that might jeopardize their position within teaching and ecclesial institutions, they opt to work from the material generated by males.10 Fear of loss or diminishment continues to mark the work of these women who avoid systematizing their own ideas or, in admitting the extent to which machismo penetrates their own lives and that of others.11

As much as Latin America must deal with a history of oppression it must also consider a

---


9 Rosaldo Nunes, p. 18.

10 Ibid, p. 18.

11 p. 17.
history that has led to the shaping of a complex system of authority meted through often engaging but powerful personalities who determine the course of political and social movements. They might be the romantic figures in the tradition of Simon Bolivar, or Che Guevara who engender enormous allegiance from people with their forceful images of battling against injustice or, they might be the local general, or priest, or mayor who controls the town's finances and political configuration. Regardless, it is these images of the *patron*, as authoritarian figures that play with the romantic metaphor of the hero that persist submerged in the culture emerging with force at key historical moments to generate a following of committed followers. The metaphor of the hero who is wrapped rather incongruously in both authority and hope is a metaphor for clarifying how liberation theology presented itself perhaps unknowingly in those early years and why it could never extend itself to a gender critique or find its footing in democratic times. While Gustavo Gutiérrez or Leonardo Boff may not be emblematic of the hero image as individuals, the theologies they developed meet those very prerequisites. Its success is measured in its dispersion to communities carried by priests, nuns and pastoral agents ardent in their desire to shape a new future, a new political and social climate and ultimately a new people. Its emancipatory intent was aimed at transformation but in broad heroic strokes of struggle through a program of mostly male design albeit while attempting to respond to real and profound issues in Latin America. Nevertheless, this predominance of males in the area has impeded the questioning of "the prevailing machismo in the structures of society" which is why Rosaldo Nunes contends that

---


13 Ileana Rodríguez, p. 16.
women must "examine the sin of sexism in the church" and embark on a "critique of the patriarchal structures that lie at the root of oppression in society."\textsuperscript{14}

In much the same spirit of the image of the male hero of Latin American history, of literature, of culture, and of religion, liberation theology took the ideal of a society emptied of injustice and claimed it to be a tenable reality. Reality and hope are caught in a strange and conflicting relationship in liberation theology. Hope is conjured in utopian images with its emphasis on a just society of enlightened citizens. The problem arises when reality conflicts with the ephemeral quality of hope complicating the possibility of ever attaining such an ideal. Even the mere suggestion of the ideal is sustainable only through large generalized notions of oppression and by maintaining the mystery of God's intentions. Once the cumbersome details of oppression are exposed or when conflicting impetuses of the elements that constitute a just society are revealed that utopian hope and vision of a future come under the scrutiny of those who recognize who they are has not been valued in the design process. The conflict for liberation theology has been how to deal with the "cumbersome" details of oppression, and not risk its favourite position among oppressed people or suffer expulsion from the Church or alienation from the community all the while struggling to preserve its emancipatory integrity.

Incorporated into the vision of an ideal society is the image of the human who transcends her or his own passivity in life to become a fully embodied individual engaged in an activism of liberation theology's own creation.\textsuperscript{15} In this notion that eclipses reality, the movement and the

\textsuperscript{14} p. 18.

\textsuperscript{15} This idea emerges from Gutiérrez's own use of the "nonperson" and Paulo Freire's work that shifts the emphasis from the non-knowing object to the knowing subject of history in \textit{Pedagogy of the Oppressed}. 
participants are simultaneously reified and objectified as the potential of a liberated future is superimposed over the realities of the lives of individuals. The image created by such discourse is of a profoundly committed Christian social activist able to surmount economical and cultural restraints to challenge powers and systems greater than themselves while at the same time being formed into a new person. The problem is that neither the romantic image of the emancipated individual nor liberation theology itself have considered the diversity among individuals or how gender and race constitute oppressions differently; nor for that matter, has a methodology evolved that could adequately address these complexities. The social activist in liberation theology is non gendered in the literature, and yet the implications of this image of someone who arrives to rescue people from their own intellectual and physical impoverishment holds profound similarities to the image of the male hero. Testimonial writing that chronicles the resistance movements of peoples in Latin America is an interesting if not also apt vehicle in which to view how the hero operates depending on the gender of the raconteur. Omar Cabezas in Under the Volcano is the guerrilla leader primed to vanquish all opponents in the battle for a higher idealism. Whereas, in the testimonial writing of women, like that of Rigoberta Menchu the emphasis is not of vanquishing the enemy but on the community and the community's endeavours to resist collectively rather than success through the heroic deeds of one commanding individual able to petition the enthusiasm and commitment of others. In the context of liberation theology, women's oppression as well as their acts of resistance are either not noted or given adequate validity because both fail to fit into the methodological mould of theologians who conceived of both liberation and oppression particularly in the 1970s in broad static conceptions of mostly class with only cursory attention to gender and race. Rosaldo Nunes applies this negation of gender to a theology that essentializes
women's nature as though this were an adequate reckoning of women's exclusion.

Latin American theology discourse often exalts the 'participation' of women in communities without critically considering the ambivalence of this process. They are incorporated into a process that is not theirs, which they have not helped to plan, even if they can derive certain advantages from it.¹⁶

Included in that heroic pattern is the reaffirmation of the male patriarchal god, who while supportive and urging of emancipation among the poor, continues to hold dominance, thereby "repress[ing] the feminine principle" which many feminists in Latin America see as a vital link in liberatory processes.¹⁷

The model of the hero is a metaphor that functions not to clarify but to essentialize the movement and the participants into narrow paradigms of legitimate emancipatory activity, theory and being.¹⁸ The poor are examined in not what could be called minute social and political detail but through vast generalized statements that elude particularity, voices, and faces. Under, what can only be called a heroic historical enterprise, it is difficult to know how women might insert themselves without donning the mask that mirrors the cultural imperative of heroism in light of how that image excludes the reality of women's lives and their experiences while confirming yet once again the dominance of male cultural practices.

Fundamental to the problem of domination is how liberation theology is conveyed from priest, religious, or pastoral worker to the laity. This of course affects how women will understand

¹⁶ Rosaldo Nunes, p. 22.


¹⁸ This drive to essentialize natures as suggested above is a way of narrowing identities or not dealing with the reality of individual's lives.
themselves, the level of their participation in CEBS and what potential they might see for a gendered emancipation. While there are probably several conversations occurring simultaneously within Christian Base Communities, the one that either re-entrenches domination or works toward its elimination occurs between the leader of the group and those receiving the message. Theologians contend that this is an active relationship of reciprocal benefit and ought not to be conceptualized in hierarchical form. Recent anthropological studies, as the previous chapter suggested, indicate that the discourse is much more controlled than first noted with the end result being one whereby participants learn the language of emancipation but not necessarily the critique that would lead them to analyze the very discourse that establishes the basis of the theology. The relationship between the leader of the CEB and its members is, simply due to its complex links to a culture embedded with varying forms of domination and to an institution predicated on hierarchy, an unequal one that when avoided as a theme of discussion on some level intimates that there are "good" topics and ones which must not be raised.

Feminists recognizing how domination works to control dialogue, insist that women learn to critique the space where discourse occurs exposing how closure functions to elide the questions that affect those most who are furthest from where powers emanate. Critics of international human rights declarations decry the lack of specificity these hold particularly in their applicability to the lives of women. Such declarations uphold the singular figure who comes to represent all


21 Refer to Caroline O.N. Moser's Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training, (New York: Routledge, 1993). See also discussions on nationalism that encaptures this
of humankind. Therefore, the difficulty has been in extending such declarations into the sphere of the home, or of informal work where women are most often found. This would also be true of the development of liberation theology and its reliance on grand metanarratives focusing on the poor, their participation in the Church and the need to bring society into a new historical period. None of this discloses the premises on which women's identity and worth are predicated. In their attention to women's lives or work as theologians, again, male theologians propose that women are somehow more spiritual or "closer to life" insinuating that women by their nature have an intuitive knowledge that men lack. Instead of breaking down barriers, the very same barriers are maintained but within a reifying discourse allowing men to preserve the arena of logic and rationality for themselves.

Liberation theology has not been particularly adept at disclosing the details of how power becomes insinuated in all avenues of human interaction. The concentration, in large part, has been in unlocking the injustices of political systems rather than the more volatile examination of power within the Church or culture. Theologians have tended to skirt those questions that might force them to acknowledge the authority embodied in their positioning in the Church and the doctrinal same problem. See Anne McClintock, "'No Longer in a Future Heaven:' Gender, Race and Nationalism," in Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives ed., Anne McClintock et al., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997) and Jan Jindy Pettman Working Women: A Feminist International Politics (New York: Routledge, 1996).

22 For numerous examples of this see Elsa Tamez's Against Machismo Interviews (Oak Park Illinois: Meyer-Stone, 1987). While this collection was perhaps to demonstrate how conscious male liberation theologians are of gender problems it in fact achieves the opposite. See also Leonardo Boff's The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and its Religious Expressions (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987). In this text Boff creates the image of the "eternal feminine" as an inadequate response to women's absence from divinity.

23 Rosaldo Nunes, p. 20.
compromises required to remain within its disciplinary fold. Paula Moya recognizes this with women's position in society at large but the same observations could be applied to theologians within the Church.

The project of examining our own location within the relations of domination becomes even riskier when we realize that doing so might mean giving up whatever privileges we have managed to squeeze out of this society by virtue of our gender, race, class or sexuality.²⁴

The result, as the previous chapter suggested, is an eclipsing or sideline of women's integral location in both society in general and more specifically in the Church.

...the 'restoration policies' that have been gaining ground over the past few years in the Catholic Church as evidenced from strict control of theology output to the 'reclericalization' of base groups -- communities and parishes --, show the difficulties inherent in any attempt to invest lay people with real power in the Catholic Church. Now, any change in the status of lay people in the Catholic Church affects its female adherents in a radical manner.²⁵

Liberation theology was developed not with women in mind but instead a euphemistic vision of the poor captured in images of heroism -- more useful for a time when political and social conditions demanded forceful and unitive community action. The image loses its value when external conditions are less polarized requiring a different model of ardency in order to persist in making public the ways in which women continue to be marginalized and the efforts required from the totality of society in order to liberate itself from all forms of oppression.

Liberation theology did offer an aperture through which some women would pass and in passing begin to rework the tenets of liberation theology better to represent the lives and aspirations of women. The process to this creation meant that first women were required to learn

²⁴ Paula M.L. Moya, p. 149.

²⁵ Moya, p. 22.
from men the history and hermeneutics of theological development before they could embark on
their own theological projects. As Rosaldo Nunes has described this in itself left women
vulnerable to the "gifts" men offered them in terms of work or access to publishing causing many
to feel "indebted" to these males and sensing their positions too fragile to risk a more radical
intellectual platform. 26

Those women who have pushed liberation theology into new self-reflexive areas of critique,
and even those whose work is more mainstream, both continue to find themselves distant from the
core where liberation theology is produced. Male theologians mark women's work as most suited
to women and their own as having universal implications. 27 While giving little attention to the
advances of feminists, male theologians continue to work in a tradition that unites them
theologically with the institutional Church without incorporating the theological advancements of
feminists often in this area or in the practice of emancipatory principles.

Women who write or practice a liberatory Christianity do so from having experienced a
Church that has not had their best interests in mind. Radicalism, as the Chicana writer and activist
Cherrie Moraga has stated, comes from having experienced, seen, and heard the sources of
oppression's emergence. For women, Moraga states, there must be

...a theory in the flesh...one where the physical realities of our lives -- our skin color, the
land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings -- all fuse to create a politic born out
of necessity. 28

This shift to an emphasis on body renders invalid the attitudes of the Church that have permeated

26 Rosaldo Nunes, p. 18.
27 p. 20.
28 Moya, p. 144.
culture that negate women's diversity and arrest their potentiality. Speaking of chicana/latina women in the United States, Ana Castillo elaborates on the hold authority administers over the lives of women that narrows the parameters in which they can conceive of themselves.

...she must obey the mandates of her culture -- not to question the institutions deemed sacred (the church, her parents, her husband); to bear and care for children; and to maintain the order of her immediate environment as it is dictated to her.

Male liberation theologians have not undertaken a critical analysis of the pervasiveness of power and authority in the lives of women particularly in the ways in which men's own authority is connected to the power structures that have impeded women's intellectual and physical freedom. While male theologians have acknowledged that religion is how many Latin American women have been conditioned to "structure their lives" few appear to have considered how this might have obstructed women's liberation from within the institution. With the Catholic Church's emphasis on sacrifice, women have been taught to serve the male and to ensure his comfort and dominance at the expense of women's lesser authority in the family ranking below even that of their male offspring. When women do advance their own causes, particularly as they attempt to open the discourse on reproductive rights, the Church and its theologians move not to contemplate the legitimacy of women's demands but instead call on God's sanctioning of all human life effectively disciplining women's right to be their own moral agents.

In order to counter the Church's misogyny, feminist theologians have needed to establish some

---

29 Ana Castillo, p. 48.
30 Castillo, p. 52.
31 ibid, p. 101.
32 p. 98.
measure of autonomy that allows distance from the Church's disciplinary powers, for themselves and for those participating in developing theoretical and practical stances. Ironically the advantage for women lies in their very marginalization that suggests that their lives (unless dependent on the Church for wages), may not be subject to the same rupture that someone such as Gutiérrez would experience should he defy Church doctrine or moral teaching. In his writing and teaching Gutiérrez appears to be struggling with the demands of the Vatican and the requirements of his work with the poor. Should he offend his superiors as Leonardo Boff discovered, he could be silenced thus disabling his freedom to write and teach openly. Women's so-called "theological freedom" earned from their subordination in the Church is not exempt from condemnations or further marginalization. And yet, their work is far more able to be incorporative of examinations of social, cultural, political and economic structures and systems as well as of religious institutions and theologies all of which are embedded in historical conditions that according Sandra Harding predate the onslaught of capitalism.33 This limited freedom is contained by their subordination meaning their work will likely never move to the core of where liberation theology is produced or be adopted by male theologians as important contributions to the advancements of their own ideas.

With centuries of oppression to contend with, feminists are discovering that religious practice can be fluid, allowing for diversity and the mixing of symbols and meaning to create a religious tradition that coheres to their image of women's emancipatory experience and needs.

---

I remind myself that after many generations of living beneath the skirts of the Divine Mother Mary, I am free! Free to call my deities by their own names -- Orishas; free to pray in my native tongues, to sing my own songs, and to honor my own rituals.\textsuperscript{34}

The act of creating rituals and meaning is in itself a protest against unjust restrictions that limit women's intellectual and creative participation in the world. Such actions are a challenge to religious institutions, dogma, history and the status quo. Still feminists and women theologians must be careful not to assume that the constructing of rituals or the application of new meaning are in themselves the acts that will change the conditions of women's lives but are only one part of what must be a more comprehensive and integrated process. Their critical tools must also remain intact so that any innovations adopted are subjected to a critique that will uncover any attempts to reify the actual conditions of women's lives. Nevertheless because these women are breaking new ground not simply in the sphere of religion but in how they live their lives, their activities could (and do) engender ire from the community, their families and the institutions that they challenge.

By refusing to submit to a man/god, the way Lilith/Eve/\textit{La Llorona} did, woman according to the myth, is to be punished forever. Such a woman may not only lose the very right to live, the stories tell us her 'spirit' may end up suffering for eternity on earth/hell. Try as she might, even modern woman never completely escapes a combination of these archetypes.\textsuperscript{35}

"[Since] spirit and sex have been linked to our oppression," writes Gloria Anzaldúa, "then they must also be linked in the strategy toward our liberation."\textsuperscript{36} Primary to this task is the distilling of


\textsuperscript{35} Ana Castillo, p. 116.

\textsuperscript{36} Anzaldúa, p. 177.
the power and influence incorporated in the Eve/Mary polarity that contains women to images of
the seductress or the martyr. Although current feminist work seeks to inspire in women the
confidence to assume authority over their desires, their intellects and their bodies the institutional
Church continues to advocate an ideologically founded conception of the heterosexual marriage
that denies women their own sexuality. With this in mind, it becomes increasingly difficult to
ascertain both a method and a form through which women might succeed in their own liberation
without having to leave the institution that has often played a central role in their lives.

Latina and Latin American theologies share a commitment to the emancipation of women but
differ amongst themselves how this might be achieved using religion as the means. Responses
vary from creating communities where pluralistic expressions and beliefs can be expressed; to a
rejection of traditional values and practices; and, finally, to the re-adaptation of traditional
symbols as a signal of respect toward the popular belief systems of some communities of women.

All these theologies share the same problematic concern in discerning under what terms of
assessment the image of Mary ought to be conceived. The responses vary widely from a
reworking of her traditional attributes to an outright rejection of its emancipatory value. In some
theological quarters, feminists are attempting a reshaping of Mary to rid her historical image of
the elements that confirm for women their role as one of silence, suffering and sacrifice. This is so
that Mary is no longer an image of one dimensionality espousing a standard that women can never
attain. Other feminists contend that Mary’s long history of manipulation by the institution renders
her emancipatory potential foiled. She embodies absolute generosity at the expense of her own
humanity and dimensionality. She holds no independent power beyond her capacity as an
intermediary. She is the epitome of sacred, untouchable purity. The point at which feminists
converge is in the importance of studying the image of Mary, its use in popular culture and through institutions as a way of gleaning yet another avenue through which the oppression of women has been instilled.

A major component of the work of feminist theologians is done in communities of women who may not be ready to assume the label of feminist for themselves. It is also true that some women theologians have not willingly adopted the label of feminist but, in some cases, have been pressured to do so through the communities of women with whom they are in contact. Nevertheless, feminist theologians are intimately aware of how their work might affect the lives of actual women who, through their contact with feminists and feminist principles, could experience further or more overt discrimination from family and community who are threatened by the apparent shifts in power that feminism seems to inspire in the imaginations of those not part of the process. They know how feminism as a term is inculcated negatively into attitudes restricting the extent to which many women feel able to make a commitment. Therefore feminists find themselves in the paradox of discerning how feminist ideas and methods can be introduced without alienating women or denying them the histories and ways of being that are familiar and important to women. Feminists must also straddle the ephemeral theoretical line that delineates good intellectual thinking from bad without re-entrenching injurious hierarchical or patriarchal practices based on assessments of higher learning, authority and leadership.

Ileana Rodriguez sees in Latin American women's writing a longing for a homeland they as women have never been able to construct for themselves that reflects women's own visions of nation and community. Instead, these writers describe a world where their participation is

37 Rosaldo Nunes, p. 25.
carefully mediated through the dictates of a culture not of their own making.

Aside from ethnicity there is the idea that woman has no country. It is distressing for me to call this fiction or imagining, because for me it is not fiction, although it has been written into fiction.  

Men, Rodriguez continues, place themselves in grand proportions central to the discourse of nation through which they establish political features and systems to secure economic advantage.  

"Nation is, for the one, an epic, the place of his own action, the site where he becomes a man...."  

Gutiérrez, in his early years of writing, while not looking to economic advantage, encouraged a particular naïve version of a socialist (later denied) state that would equalize all citizens through the adoption of a set of Christian values found in liberation theology. This vision of hope was established as a metanarrative meaning that its value would be felt for all citizens. Unfortunately as in most metanarratives, Gutiérrez's vision was bereft of too many of the realities that constitute living encasing itself in an image that suggested it had the capacity to answer the needs of all citizens. The metanarrative can not address the complexities or the "messiness" of human existence as the vision for a better political and social future becomes simply another version of hegemonic discourse myopic of the suppression of subjects unable to find an entry into a discourse that has failed to account for their particularities.  

---

38 Rodriguez, p. 18.

39 ibid, p. 83.

40 p. 83.

necessarily well developed especially since major institutions like the Church were dealt only vague critiques (and even these disappeared in the 1980s). Such metanarratives neglect the distinctiveness of the conditions which inform women's lives in society that has excluded them from gaining access to the discourse or mechanisms involved in nation building of which the Church has been a prime participant. Their lives are deeply influenced by cultural and political strictures placed on their identities that keep women searching for openings in political, economic and social systems to allow them to succeed at the roles expected of them (motherland) against the limitations placed on them by society. The task of feminist theologians is to secure a place where women can establish a "homeland" that allows them the freedom to express and develop religious meaning in their lives without suffering the humiliation of having been accused of committing a deleterious act against the dictates of the Church, culture and nation. This place is both metaphorical and real allowing women the personal freedom to alter their daily activities and the community to challenge the structures that continue to impose limitations. In what follows are some of the methods through which a diversity of feminists have attempted to understand the oppression of women while also encouraging emancipatory change.

The issue of how to use experience critically is where Gutiérrez and feminist theologians diverge. Gutiérrez looks elsewhere for moral, social and theological renderings of humanity's condition. Instead the body of his knowledge emerges from his intellectual mediation with the institution. Feminists follow a different line of knowledge accumulation based on experience.42

42 Experience remains a contentious issue in feminist circles. A current strain among hispanic and latin american feminists describes the importance of experience being evaluated critically without disallowing for cultural factors that makes its evaluation different from that of North American, white middle class interpretations. They emphasize the importance of diversity in experience and interpretation.
Their attachment to the institution is less stringently maintained allowing them the flexibility to develop more locations from which to understand experience and use it in creating illustrations through which theory and praxis might be comprehended. In the reworking of interpretations, even women's own perception of their experiences is open for additional critical examination. Their first and final commitment is not to the Church but to women who have been poorly served by religious institutions and dogma. In the end, as Gebara and Bingemer have stated, words to express religiosity are not nearly as essential as the emancipation that may follow from new understandings of experience. Feminist liberation theology may draw on similar themes as the liberation theology of Gutiérrez but parts company on critical issues surrounding the authority of knowledge, its legitimation and the methods for its dispersion. From this, and in order to insert integrity into the process, feminists must subject themselves to the same rigorous critical examination they impose externally to ascertain how their relationships with other women who may be poor is defined; where authority and marginalization exist in unequal proportions; or, whether or not they are enacting yet another form of reification changing women into objectified models for use in analytical examples. As is the case in the work of Gutiérrez, this process of self-reflexive critique is not always apparent in their work beyond feminists' rejection of institutional pressures to conform to its dictates. However, in general terms the feminist project is designed to avoid the pitfalls of heroic gestures or narratives that impose cultural identities romanticizing vanguardist and revolutionary leaders and movements that lead to notions of "imperialist nostalgia." Rather the project of liberation is imagined as a long and arduous one with

43 Gebara and Bingemer, p. 11.
advancements being made (although sometimes even losing them) at every level of human experience through a vigilant attention to oppression in its cultural and political identities.

The objective of this next section is aimed at illustrating the contrast between feminist theological work and the type of work mainstream liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez now undertake. The examples of Latin American and latina feminist theological work in theory and method in this next section are provided to stress the array of essential contributions these women have made in liberation theology but that have gone largely ignored by their male counterparts. Each of these examples also demonstrates the diversity of work being developed by feminist theologians. So while each section is an entity onto its own, each theologian's work is set against the next as though in conversation with the others in order to clarify the differing objectives as well as the gaps and strengths in theory and method.

The Choices: Latin American and Latina Feminist Theologians

Ivone Gebara and María Bungeemer

As feminist theologians Ivone Gebara and María Bungeemer strive to bring feminist theory to women who find significant meaning in traditional symbols associated with the Church. Mary, for these theologians is not rejected but transformed as a serviceable representative model of the oppression of women but also as a force on which new religious expression and change can be affixed. Through these re-workings, Mary becomes a mooring on which women might draw the strength to substantiate their changing identities and perceptions of the world. Theirs (Gebara and Bungeemer) is not a drive to discredit the value of the Church but instead a reckoning of its

role in the oppression of women with options for the recovery of women's full humanity within its enclaves.

In the spirit of the younger Gutiérrez who was more adamant about theology reflecting the real lives of people than his present location that attaches theology to the magisterium, Gebara and Bingemer view theology as legitimate only if it reflects and acts on the actual life experiences of those its meant to serve. Such a task means explaining not only faith in God, but explain it intelligibly at each point in history and appropriately for different cultural contexts. One element in this intelligibility is a new development in anthropology that can do justice to the complexity of the human reality.\(^4\)

The "complexity of human reality" demands a disclosing on how human existence has created unjust dualities that assigns one particular gender intelligence and spiritual dominance over another that is relegated to a sphere where movement to shape one's identity freely is curtailed.\(^5\)

In their work, Gebara and Bingemer seek to redress this deficiency by "overcom[ing] the most common anthropological short-comings -- male-centrism, dualism, idealism, one-dimensionalism" and instead focus their work on establishing "a human centered, unifying, realist, and pluri-dimensional anthropology."\(^6\)

The act of subverting orthodoxy is apparent in the freedom Gebara and Bingemer construct by expanding the boundaries of theology through the re-invention of meaning around rituals and symbols, and even more risky, new concepts of God that run counter to Vatican authority but are

---


\(^5\) Gebara and Bingemer, p. 1.

\(^6\) Ibid., p. 172.
effective in illustrating how former models and methodologies were constructed within the paradigms of patriarchy. For instance, these theologians claim that God's revelation must be found in women.48 The emphasis is placed on the creative capacity of women to shape their own religious meaning without adhering to the knowledge claims of an institution that has promoted a deity lacking in female qualities or comprehension of the primacy of women's bodies and intellects. The act of simply expanding the notions of deity by suggesting that discerning God's will through women is necessary, places women at the centre of discernment as opposed to the more usual positioning of being recipients of knowledge funnelled through the voices of men. Although in a recent article Gebara disappointedly continues to define God in male terms which would suggest her innovations in defining God are still within normative patterns.49

Rather than inverting hierarchies, Gebara and Bingemer suggest relationships and systems should be stretched horizontally without eliminating the difference among individuals, or the historical patterns that divide genders. In this structure value is equalized, allowing for each to assume subjectivity in both the public and private spheres. It erases "man" as the primary interpreter of God's will or holder of knowledge.50

Mary, as I mentioned at the onset of this discussion on Gebara and Bingemer's theological work, is central. She moves from being a distant unidimensional figure at the service of God to having an important presence in the lives of women derived from her experiences of having lived

---

48 p. xi.


50 Gebara and Bingemer, p. 3.
the life of a woman struggling with political and economic pressures. What Gebara and Bingemer have done is shift Mary's meaning away from institutional concerns to ones that reflect the lives of the women living in poverty. In making this shift they highlight the contextuality of Mary's life as a woman in her own historical time as a way of confirming the long tradition of marginalization in women's history. Like Gutiérrez, they also tend to universalize the experience of poor women. Their intent nonetheless is to highlight the problem of female symbols historically when used to limit women's lives. Their task is a difficult one of recovery, done mostly it appears as a signal of respect for Mary's popularity amongst Latin Americans in general and her appeal to women specifically as a source of empathy and strength. The objective is to end the Church's assumption that its authority allows it the liberty to use symbols, rituals, and dogma to decide women's moral and intellectual embodiment and worth.51

The Vatican's use of Mary renders her impact submissive and accepting as she calls on followers to engage in "prayer, fasting, and penance" reconfirming the traditional identity patterns that have been imposed on women.52 The Christian tradition, as Gebara and Bingemer state, is a "male centric" one, constructed on the basis of a salvific history dependent on the intervention of someone or something greater than humans (not unlike the part played by the male hero who rescues those beaten by society). This narrative has become so imbedded in society that Gebara and Bingemer urge women to examine how their own identities have been produced in compliance with the institutional and structural powers of an androcentric society.

Their objective as feminist theologians is not to deny men participatory access to the

51 p. 3.
52 p. 140.
development of emancipatory theologies, but to transform how theology has been done in the past. For Gebara and Bingemer the process itself must make evident how theology has ignored, consciously or not, its own part in abetting the oppression of women. By struggling at the outer edges of the institutional Church, the hope these feminists hold is eventually to force the institution to admit responsibility for its complicity in the domination of women and from this set about altering the practices that perpetuate subordination.

For Gebara and Bingemer any theology must include in its knowledge of human existence both the mind and the body of all the participants. Their response is to rid theology of its own tendencies toward self-aggrandizement in its assumption that it can represent the needs and identities of all peoples across all cultural boundaries and times with a set category of universal truths.

With this impulse to universalize, claim Gebara and Bingemer, theology has failed to understand the difficulties under which individuals battle to construct their lives. Statements on morality are aimed at control and judgement rather than attempting to discern the ways in which morality must bend to the pressures of individual circumstances. Theology must never, in Gebara and Bingemer's estimation, be used to conceal the injustice, the suffering or the histories of people that allow individuals the insight to fathom their lives from a diversity of subject

\[53\] p. 15.

\[54\] Gebara and Bingmar have not broken entirely from what Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza would name "kyriarchal mind-sets...[nor have they explored critically] to what degree the textualized wo/men characters of the Christian Testament communicate kyriarchal values and visions." Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza Jesus Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 189.

\[55\] Gebara and Bingemer, p. 8.
positions.

The Church's reliance on normative but ideologically laddened notions of human existence and experience of God is not unlike Gutiérrez's large descriptive brush strokes of oppression and a theology that touches only ever so briefly on the details of lives lived from within the parameters of sexism and racism. Both Gutiérrez and the institution have based their precepts on narrow conceptions of human reality and nature meant to stand as universals for all Latin Americans or Christians in general. The result is the establishment of artificial templates of who women ought to be and how they should live and evaluate their own existence. This process is made all the more compliant in fortifying structures of oppression through the pervasiveness with which these templates become integrated into the cultural and political practices of society.

The openness with which Gebara and Bingemer (or any theologian for that matter) critique the Church can only be the result of their insistence on maintaining their autonomy allowing them the freedom to think, write and teach the injustices as they see them without restraint or undue preoccupation for the disciplinary powers of the institution. Their commitment as they see it lies with the communities of lay people with whom they have established links rather than the institution that demands obedience. Where their critique is stymied is not through the Church but rather in their hesitation not to offend the needs of the community they seek to address. Here among communities of believers their theology lessens its ardency in critique as it adopts such irretrievable images like Mary as the centrepiece of their work. Even so, their theology maintains its integrity as Gebara and Bingemer move gender to the centre of the development of theory, theology and praxis. And unlike Gutiérrez, they explore how language, theology, and culture have become the transmitters of unjust practices.
Gebara and Bingemer rescue Mary by arguing that their enterprise to shape her is neither new nor unique but rather no different than the process that has been evolving spontaneously at both a popular and institutional level for centuries. Accordingly, Christians have always expanded the meaning of symbols and images to reflect the conditions of their lives at important historical junctures even as those meanings sit in contrast to institutional dictates. This implies that Mary is more than just a mother of perfect pious repute but a figure that can draw on "elements of nature, eroticism, and the people's traditional faith." Gebara and Bingemer suggest that the relevance of symbols and rituals are kept vital not through the institution's reworking of meaning but through the lay community's need and drive to have religion reflect their most pressing needs as a society. The result is a rupture between what happens among the lay community and the intentions and motives of the institutional Church. In a peculiar way, the lay community retains its capacity for invention and subversion. Mary's presence and significance is immensely diverse and creative in Latin American history beginning from the time of the Conquest that saw the emergence of divine figures aimed at bridging colonial and indigenous worlds and aims. The Virgin of Guadalupe who appeared five times to Juan Diego in 1531 continues to evoke powerful symbolic importance among many Mexicans and Chicanos living in the United States. Her importance rests in the colour of her skin and her appearance to an indigenous man which together reflect her own indigenous roots and loyalties against the authority of the

56 p. 144.

57 p. 127.

Catholic/Spanish Church.

We would have to visit Luján in Argentina, Chiquinquirá in Colombia; we would have to become acquainted with La Purísima, the Immaculate Conception, who is called La Lina in Cruzco, Purísima in Nicaragua, the Virgin of Guapulo in Quito, Our Lady of Caridad del Cobre in Cuba, Our Lady of Altagracia in the Dominican Republic, and so many other names that it is rash to cite these names without all the others.59

In times of social unrest these images function to represent the needs of the community devalued by political and cultural authorities.60 They inspire a form of resistance and sense of righteousness for the anguish felt by the community at the hands of injustice. Even though Mary is primarily depicted as the mother who offers unlimited nourishment, generosity and love she, through her other more indigenous incarnations, can also inspire contestation in the community as well as deeply personal relationships.61 In part this comes from her approachability resulting from apparitions to those in need and through her adoption of indigenous features. These apparitions are then conceived as acts of solidarity against the motives of institutions that have failed to understand the needs of the poor. Mary's approachability is linked to her dual capacity to be both divine and human as need dictates it. Her human attributes allow her to fathom suffering and the language of the poor while her divine station provides her with the authority to access greater

59 Gebara and Bingemar, p. 158

60 p. 149.

61 Gloria Anzaldúa in "Coatlalopeuh, She Who Has Dominion Over Serpents," relates how much the image of Guadalupe is a created one with the Church's contributions as well in naming her the "Mother of God" at the time of her apparitions so that her "split" features parallel the splinteredness of the people conquered as well. In Goddess of the Américas La Diosa de la Américas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe, ed., Ana Castillo (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), p. 52.
power. She can be understanding of oppression, supportive of contestation and hopeful that change for a people's "economic and ideological interests" might be realized.

The central justification for Mary's use as an emancipatory figure comes through Luke's The Magnificat in which Mary pleads the case for all suffering peoples. Gebara and Bingemer claim that when Mary utters the phrase "let it be done" her call is not in acceptance of the inevitability of suffering but rather a plea to urge individuals to act against the injustices that incur suffering. Mary, as Gebara and Bingemer perceive her, is not a subordinate divinity but a "human co-principle in the process of the saving incarnation of God." She becomes a model on how human suffering ought to be assessed against ideologies of power.

The dilemma in any use of Mary is her reported historical life for which there is little or no evidence. Her creation, is one that rests on the needs and impulses of the Church through history and lay people as Church, who at various moments have sought out a more compassionate image through which to make their petitions. Since there is little in biblical or other archaeological

---

62 Gebara and Bingemer, p. 149.

63 p. 157.

64 p. 69.

65 p. 96.

66 p. 86.

67 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 172. Schussler Fiorenza notes that the Mary of the poor is usually constructed to "reinscribe the secondary status of women and the feminine insofar as Mary as the representative of the church or of the new humanity clearly remains subordinated to G*d. Or it submerges the poor woman Mary of Nazareth and hence sublates the mariological female symbol into the notion of the poor and subjugated people." In either case the Mary who might be an important feminist feature for women is lost.
material to support a fully defined image of a historical person the Church, in effect created
Mary's identity, as well as her religious and social meaning to reflect the motivations of particular
historical periods. Gebara and Bingemer have continued this tradition of shaping religious images
and imbuing them with more contextual meaning with the distinct objective of incorporating
community beliefs as opposed to institutional prerogatives but they do so not so much with the
Church in mind but the traditions of the people. Although even traditional community beliefs
undergo a transformation as they pass through Gebara and Bingemer's emancipatory system of
theological development. The outcome, in terms of Mary is an image that consistently assumes
additional meaning able to evoke passionate loyalty from her adherents.\textsuperscript{68} This is not to say
however, that Gebara and Bingemer have succeeded in rescuing Mary from her links to power. In
fact, I would agree with Schussler Fiorenza and say that Mary's status is never outside the
parameters of the hierarchy of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. As Paula Moya argues, the
"feminist project" must move beyond goals of marginalization and survival.\textsuperscript{69}

The Mary Gebara and Bingemer imagine is one whose primary function is to stand alongside
oppressed communities of people urging action against injustice. She is easily situated into this
role through stories that emphasize her own personal experiences of human loss and suffering.
She is placed in popular discourse (confirmed often in apparition accounts) as independent from
the restrictions of institutions so that no official body becomes the principal interpreter of her will.
The act of constructing new alternatives for Mary is in itself a challenge to the institution and its

\textsuperscript{68} p.37.

\textsuperscript{69} Paula Moya, p. 131.
hierarchal process of theological legitimation.  

Gebara and Bingemer are perhaps less concerned with the institution than with recovering the religious and social identities of women although more needs to be said on the links between popular beliefs and the institution. Therefore neither Mary's gender nor the fact that her origins place her in a specific time and place resulting in "a particular context, set within family, social, economic, political and religious structures" are uncovered well enough to understand her potential use as a feminist symbol of liberation. With the interwoven features of divinity and humanity, nevertheless, the image of Mary does stand as a forceful and compassionate symbol for those suffering against often the rigidness of religious practice and judgement found in the institutional Church.

The most contentious attribute of Mary's identity is her virginity. Gebara and Bingemer avoid its implications by configuring it outside its biological dimensions and instead, develop it as a symbol of possibility for a "faithful people" of whom Mary is an exemplary part. Her virginity is further pressed into spiritual meaning as Gebara and Bingemer contrast it to humanity's "poverty when it comes to achieving its own salvation without God's grace." The idea of birth and faith combine to create an image of new potential or hope when people "allow themselves to be shaped

---

70 To understand the variety of reflections on Guadalupe see Ana Castillo ed., Goddess of the Américas La Diosa de la Américas and Jeanette Rodriguez's Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

71 Gebara and Bingemer, p. 46.

72 Gebara and Bingemer, p. 56. Mary's virgin birth comes to represent the birth of a new people which I contest is the type of disconnectedness to history that allows people to forego critique.
by the Spirit." Instead of deconstructing the virginity component and drawing links to patriarchal practices that denied women the right to their sexuality, Gebara and Bingemer raise it to a status that is neither realistic nor in line with their own critique on the necessity to disavow all forms of domination. The question of sexuality and women's expression of it continues to jut against theologians own sense of appropriate conceptions of divinity and therefore humanity. It becomes insufficient to state the obvious that body and intellect are linked. The process is subject to failure when symbols given human origins are not accorded the same unity as though once again the cartesian split of higher and lower virtues is presented as the model for human existence.

The hope contained in the immaculate conception remains a fixed feature in Gebara and Bingemer's description of Mary. The assumption to heaven, as these theologians envision it, is representative of the hope that women need to bolster their efforts that promises that through their own actions their lives will be transformed. With her assumption Mary is transformed beyond the dimensions of individuality to become "a symbol-figure, a collective personality who points to a whole people." Gebara and Bingemer write about "wholeness" as the recapturing of people's entire identity both individually and collectively as social groups or societies. In this moment domination no longer exists interrelationally as people insist on claiming the entirety of

---

73 p.106.

74 I have difficulty in accepting the "idealistic" hope of Gebara and Bingemer. In this area they parallel the type of naive optimism of Gutiérrez. The fact is that women may not see a lot of change in the conditions of their lives aside from some internal changes they make that affect their own identity. This of course is valuable; however to equate the Assumption of Mary with the visible rewards women might experience seems to put women in the same position of attempting to fulfill the expectations of others.

75 p. 118.
their histories, their bodies and their intellects. According to Gebara and Bingemer, Mary embodies this progression from a life of oppression to a state of absolute fullness. Her enticement for assuming the status of a symbol of emancipation and hope begins with both her lived experiences and her gender drawing in all the histories of meaning those two positions hold for people working toward their own liberation. These are states of being that neither Jesus nor God ever represent and as such neither is re-invented to the same degree to capture a parallel intimacy of loyalty.

In Mary, the "feminine principle" that Gebara and Bingemer see as lost in the primacy of Jesus and God is recovered when the misogynist tendencies are bypassed and the focus of theology is returned to the community. Rather than perpetuating images of passivity, these theologians attempt to situate Mary’s suffering as the place from which her intimate knowledge of oppression began. Through this process, the discussion of the primacy of experience as a source from which knowledge may emerge is confirmed theologically. With her divine-like status she affirms the equality in spiritual potential of both women and men. And is representative of the idea that "wholeness" rests in the unity of the female and male in both divine and human spheres.

While Gebara and Bingemer are more theologically innovative and more consciously attempting to integrate a self-reflexive critique than Gutiérrez, they introduce new problems that limit the potential of women's liberation. So much of their attention and indeed their work is placed on re-inventing a Mary (an enterprise which is not entirely convincing) but little or no

76 Official Church teaching would not support the divine status of Mary. The point in Gebara and Bingemer’s work is to expand the theological parameters of official teaching to include not only their own interpretations but the interpretations of those they serve.
effort is made to do likewise with either Jesus or God. Both of these figures remain entrenched in traditional institutional discourses undermining Gebara and Bingemer's emancipatory claim to eliminate all forms of hierarchy. They fail to account for how these figures confirm gender identities and positions of power. Neglecting to address the core of Christianity is not unlike the leaders of social movements who plead with the community to embody their conception of the "new man [sic]" without addressing how as leaders they employ practices that maintain the status quo. In attempting to save elements that have long historical traditions embedded in misogynist practices, their reinvention tends not to highlight the critique but to cover it in a new ideology that illustrates the contradictions that exist from within the theory and its practice.

The problem in Gebara and Bingemer's use of Mary as a symbol of emancipation for women is in her status as a mother of a martyred child of God that can never be sublimated fully into a model appropriate for the individual impulses, demands and desires of women. Her proximity, even in an emancipatory state, to traditional attributes of submission, endurance, celibacy and positions of patriarchal power disallow her as a viable symbol to bridge tradition on one side and women's liberation on the other. Even in emancipatory movements Mary is never fully liberated from her history leaving her a vastly contradictory symbol of having to contend with too many demands. With the critique Gebara and Bingemer cultivate against misogyny Mary's feminism can not battle a history that never fully releases her from her ties to the institution.

Gebara and Bingemer's dispensation of Mary's virginity, her assumption to heaven and all the


78 Discussion of this idea will continue in the fourth chapter. This is also a theme developed in the work of Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz later in this same chapter.
other qualities and events meant to endow her with subordinate divine status is too facile. To combat their critics, Gebara and Bingemar argue that the retention of Mary as a emancipatory symbol is important in spite of its deficiencies in order to avoid alienating those who continue to hold Mary as an important religious symbol. While their point is a valid one the methods of recovery remain questionable particularly in light of their discretionary methods that choose to side more with Mary's other worldly identity than her human status when faced with the problematic attributes assigned to her by the Church. In doing this they suppress the history of women's oppression.

Since their task is a theological one that endeavours to draw out meaning from the actual practices of people not given access in the institutional Church the question is to what extent are they successful in pushing emancipatory meaning and praxis to its potential. Or, to what degree do these innovations in the style of Mary advance resistance, or organized political action at a collective and public level. Still, Gebara and Bingemer have failed to clarify how the experience of oppression leads to a critical knowledge of injustice that opens avenues for organization and protest. They stray perilously close to the re-entrenchment of reified notions of the poor by not incorporating an assessment of what elements need to be present to move experience from simply a state of oppression to an example of how knowledge and power function to solidify unjust practices. Finally, Gebara and Bingemer appear to be seeking the merger of two distinct worlds -- that of the emancipated believer with that of the institution through their reworking of Mary. While this might shift their work from the margins into the arena of legitimation in terms of the

Church it may also compromise the vital links to critique and method that should form the hallmark of their work.

The reality of social movements suggests that the task of introducing and developing emancipatory processes is both frustrating and precarious, as theologians in this case, strive to blend familiarity with their new and perhaps not legitimized (by the community or the institution) emancipatory ideas and practices. Whereas Gutiérrez's own transformation has been into a more institutionally rooted theologian, Gebara and Bingemer's theology, in spite of its obvious problems, holds more emancipatory potential although it sits vulnerably between loyalty to the people it is meant to serve, meaning the women they hope who will embark on their own transformative innovations and desire for revolutionary change, and Gebara and Bingemer's own feminism. This problem is not unique to these theologians, others also seem to find it difficult to forge a course that is both consistently feminist and still loyal to the people it represents. The difference between Gebara and Bingemer and Gutiérrez is located in where the allegiance in terms of theology resides. Gutiérrez has aligned his work within the parameters set by the Magisterium rather than allowing his theology to be shaped by the impetuses of a laity engaged in merging history and context with new and old symbols.  

80 See Caroline Moser's Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training (New York: Routledge, 1993), for discussions on how difficult the implementation of emancipatory programs can be for a number of reasons including the wide range of knowledge bases that participants bring.

81 He would certainly contest this proposal even as he says theology must be confirmed through the Church. He sees such work as We Drink From Our Own Wells as precisely the inclusion of the knowledge of the people when in fact much is a reiteration of Church doctrine in the voice of Gutiérrez.
Ana Maria Bidegain

Ana Maria Bidegain brings to the discussion of Latin American feminist theology a stridently new cord on which to balance analysis and critique. Her move is so radical that it clarifies the gaps found in the work of Gebara and Bingemer by introducing into the discourse the question of sexuality and its presence in political and social systems and structures. Her location in theology therefore is a dramatic departure from the work of both Gutiérrez, Gebara and Bingemer. In the adoption of sexuality as the mediating centre she closes off potential escape valves that otherwise could temper the content of her work. Instead she demonstrates how religion, politics, economics and culture have all benefited from the suppression or the construction of women's sexuality in particular ways.

...woman appears as more religious, more family-oriented, less political, less professional. However, this is not due to the nature of the feminine. Nor is it owing to chance. It is due to the historico-social subjugation of women, as reinforced by the view of sexuality propagated by a rigoristic, puritanical Christianity.\(^2\)

Women's marginalization, as Bidegain chronicles it, emerges from the time of the Conquest when women (mostly indigenous or black) were forced to become commodities for white European males and later with the onslaught of industrialization were measured by their use value as cheap labour. Women were only marginally permitted entry into the public sphere and once there vigilantly surveyed for behaviour not in compliance with either their gender or their class.

In the time of colonization women were assigned qualities and therefore duties considered more suited to the dictates of their biology. And later, as Latin America established its autonomy

---

from colonial powers women, as "good mothers" were "honoured" with the task of ensuring the defence of national borders by securing the well being of the family. The model women were encouraged to emulate was none other than the pious, sacrificing Virgin Mary against whose reputation women were to be measured. Virginity and motherhood became male ideals of the female identity.

In Church rhetoric sex is concurrently denied legitimacy and maintained as a tool for the rigorous evaluation of moral sanctity. Even in emancipatory movements the sexual component is connected to women through a cultural discourse that plays on images of a seductive Eve enacting on men's appetites who are imagined as suave romantic adventurers. For women to be allotted entrance in either Church or social movement the unwritten cultural contract stipulates the disconnection from their bodies. Gender, much less sexuality, was essentially a taboo subject in social movements particularly in the 1970s and early 1980s as cadres continued to view feminism as an example of imperialistic import meant to divide the movement. Still as liberation theology sought to disclose webs of oppression no discussion on sex, relationships or the "morality theology of sex" surfaced. To date mainstream theologies have only allowed feminist theology (but not necessarily issues of sexuality) to enter their consciousness in statements of acknowledgement of its presence.

Bidegain's emphasis on experience pushes the emancipatory discourse that accompanies it

---

83 This is not to say they are treated as "asexual" beings. Probably in actual fact they are treated as the opposite. However for them to gain respect, this part of who they are must be submerged.

84 Bidegain, p. 113.

85 p. 114.
further than Gebara and Bingemer by drawing the major analytical themes through a feminist
perception on sexuality seen historically in the making through class, politics and culture. By
shaping the discourse around questions of how sexuality has been integrated into power structures
she erases all the

puritanical conceptions of sexuality as the ideological foundation, in the church as in Latin
American society, of the patriarchal mentality on which all sexist oppression is based.\(^\text{86}\)

Bidegain believes with the elimination of misogynist elements dispersed through sexual mores
women will find the means to express themselves in new ways and in doing so will discover how
Jesus and Mary can be re-configured for emancipatory purposes.

In fact, Bidegain's Mary stands in stark contrast to the more sanitized version presented by
Gebara and Bingemer with her addition of sexuality to Mary's identity. Mary is still representative
of the poor but once her sexuality is added she becomes a far more challenging symbol for change
among women who have had their sexuality prescribed for them. By returning to Mary her
sexuality, the Eve/Mary duality that has persisted as a constant reminder of women's choices finds
all its repressive power diminished along with the usual designations of what constitutes the
sacred.\(^\text{87}\) It fractures the Church's negation of the importance of the body and alters how women
might think or judge themselves by returning to them authority over their entire beings.

The Church in its sweeps at describing the varieties of human experience continues to be ill at
ease with sexuality unless dealing with reproduction. Bidegain believes the exclusion of women's
full sexuality in the Church and in the broader structures of culture reveals the repressiveness with

\(^{86}\) p. 114.

\(^{87}\) Bidegain, p. 108.
which society secures control over women's lives. Her critique and use of marxist theory which is interesting considering Gutiérrez's disavowal of its worth, traces the subjugation of women through economic and political fortunes of ruling male elites whose dominance is affixed to the subordination of the other. The complexity and pervasiveness of oppression that links itself into the operating mechanisms of society itself suggests to Bidegain that liberation's realization can only occur when the analysis has allowed for how race and gender have been shaped by domination.

While Gebara and Bingemer avoid rethinking the identity of God, Bidegain takes hold of it and transforms God into a divinity of both male and female form through which God then has the capacity to address the fullness of humanity's experiences and needs while calling for a new form of justice that more carefully attunes itself to the specificities of gendered lives. In turn the deity can demand that all people, regardless of their gender, take "equal responsibility for home and society" drawing to a close the distinction between the private and public spheres. Bidegain justifies her enterprise with the example of Jesus, who, as she claims, understood that those most maligned in society were better equipped to make knowledge statements on the conditions of their lives. Bidegain demands that as a society divided by class each must engage in more daring ventures that force the parameters of where knowledge might emerge to be extended and given value. In the employment of a more inclusive process aimed at ascertaining the roots and

---

88 ibid., p. 111.
89 p. 113.
90 p. 116.
91 p. 105.
mechanisms of oppression, the impulse to subordinate the other is not only easier to recognize but more publicly declared as unjust.

Sexuality, in Bidegain's writing finds a platform for investigation that avoids pandering to outdated ideologies that reinforce patterns of behaviour that lead to women's marginalization. She draws to the surface the layered effects of sexual subordination demonstrating the power that an ideology of exclusion can hold in society often so integrated into systems and behaviours that it is no longer readily visible unless attended to through acute attention. Her analysis falls short in its neglect to extend the analysis of sexuality beyond the parameters of heterosexuality or to see the difficulties that arise with a gendered deity of any form. Regardless, her main contention that "...sexual politics are constitutive of all social relations and that colonizing processes are formulated and practised through the disciplining of Third-World women's bodies" is a forceful and necessary critique.

The complexity of her critique against the embedded nature of culture in matters of sexuality deems a political, social solution perhaps less negligible in communities where people remain reluctant to speak of the most intimate dimension of their lives. Therefore as a dimension of theology it is not likely to find a large following among women caught in traditional relationships.

Feminist theology is meant "to produce and transform the terms of struggle and liberation" where analysis has not gone previously to bring to critical consciousness the contexts and peoples

---

92 p. 108.

hidden in theological and social discourse. Gebara and Bingemer seem to press theology only as far as they envision their communities able to move, whereas Bidegain urges the analysis even deeper to expose how "hierarchies of rule" have used propriety to shape identities that negate the fullness of human experience without which individuals remain fragmented. Granted Bidegain does not explain how her work imposes itself on liberatory practices.

Her analysis perhaps is best suited for other theologians as a way of informing them of the gaps in analysis in their work by dissecting the oppression of women with far more accuracy than those who choose not to include sexuality as an element of examination. Her work is both a response and challenge to liberation theologians to broaden their theological and analytical skills even if the cost might result in a fundamentally different theology and praxis.

Feminist theology like that of Bidegain's, delineates the methods women use to order their lives in conditions of despair. Its intent is not simply to reveal but to explain and provide portholes through which women might perceive new means of knowing who they are and what they might do to shift the balance in favour of greater access to a created life of their own invention.

Talitha Cumi

"Talitha Cumi" finds its origins in Gutiérrez's own land of Peru, and while certainly emancipatory in its project, this group of women have taken analysis and theology in vastly different directions than Gutiérrez. Talitha Cumi is described as a "circle of Christian feminists"
who, as they attempt to formulate more emancipatory religious experiences and meaning for themselves, critique the patriarchal structures of Catholicism, its theology, its practices and the implications of these features on the lives of Latin American women. The role this group of feminists have set for themselves is not unlike the objectives of Bidegain although in this particular project "Talitha Cumi" feminists have detailed their meetings with other feminists from throughout Latin America analyzing the role of religion on the lives of women through feminist "encuentros" or encounters held biannually in Latin America. Their work is unique in that as a group of committed feminists they situate their analysis outside the parameters of the institutional Church where they are freer to engage new theoretical and practical courses devoid of patriarchal links.

The women of these "encuentros" have gone further than the feminist theologians already mentioned in terms of analysis of patriarchal systems embedded in society and in their critique of the Catholic Church. Gone are any references to a male god or for that matter to God. Instead they refer to the "living energy that sustains us" avoiding the gendered deity dilemma that persists in the work of other feminist theologians. Mary is eliminated entirely after finding no sustainable linkage to emancipatory ideals not weighted by Mary's connection to misogynist intents and practices. For the women of "Talitha Cumi" the image of Mary is too entrenched in the mythic


98 Talitha Cumi, p. 6 (my translation).
Mother/Virgin male ideal used to control and limit women's own sense of self-identity much less the societal approval required to gain entrance into political institutions and systems to warrant her a place in emancipatory discourse. They contend the Church has used the Mary/Eve duality to force women to comply to the limiting identities found in what converts into a good/bad dialectic. These feminist critics see the power of the Mary/Eve rhetoric evidenced in the extent to which women have internalized the judgement rendered by each image that in turn functions to assess their individual value as women. The images contend women are weaker physically, emotionally, and certainly intellectually which accounts for their "dependence" on male partners, fathers, and sons as their protectors guarding them against women's ever lurking potential to step into "immoral behaviour." Accordingly the Church's theological premise integrated in liturgies, commentaries and rituals reinforce androcentric attitudes rather than functioning to liberate or create a territory where gender is not implicated. From every vantage of examination, the women who make up "Talitha Cumi" see in the Church a structure amassed in misogyny. They contest John Paul II's continual inferences that women's primary vocation is that of motherhood and that all other vocations, desires, or needs are subordinated to this one act. And like Bidegain, "Talitha Cumi" sees the root of the Church's misogyny arising from its dismissal or control over sexuality. The control the Church exerts is found in how identities and roles are assigned to each gender and then declared normative for all people of that particular sex. The Church is given a

---

99 ibid, p. 5.
100 p. 1.
101 p. 1.
102 p. 3.
female identity and yet its function is dependent on the exclusive control of a male hierarchy.\textsuperscript{103}

Women, under this rubric, are encouraged to be sacrificing and loyal helpmates to their husbands and families all the while subordinating themselves to the authority of others who are assumed to hold greater knowledge and ability.\textsuperscript{104} For their dependence, the very feature that women have been forced ideologically and socially to accept as their fate to fit the "good woman" category they find themselves degraded by men who view them as uninspiring, energy depleting dependents.

Members of "Talitha Cumi" assert that critique is important for knowledge so that unjust patterns and structures can be altered or dismantled. Their project is both deconstructive and transformative as alternatives appear for having exposed the elements that seek to obscure and diminish real identity and meaning. The setting of alternative theological methods, hermeneutics, liturgies and rituals allow for women to be the creative sources of their own spirituality without looking to the Church to anoint their activities and without subordinating political contestation to their spiritual endeavours. By providing space in both an intellectual and physical sense, women secure the autonomy in which to practice religion in a fashion that liberates them. This does not preclude their participation in the institutional Church but provides them with the resources to act

\textsuperscript{103} The situation of women in Latin America is complex and varied from country to country. What many theorists fail to deal with is the high percentage of single mothers throughout the region and within the ideologies that surround women and home. For one view on this see "Matrifocal Males: Gender, Perception and Experience of the Domestic Domain in Brazil," by Parry Scott in \textit{Gender, Kinship, Power: A Comparative and Interdisciplinary History}, edited by Mary Jo Maynes, Ann Waltner, Birgitte Soland, and Ulrike Strasser. (New York: Routledge, 1996) pp. 287-301. For a view on the legalized process of women's subordination see in the same text: "The Social Construction of Wife and Mother: Women in Porfirian Mexico, 1880-1917." pp. 275-286.

\textsuperscript{104} p.5.
on the Church in such a way that constitutes them as subjects and not the objects of androcentric objectives.

The way in which the women in "Talitha Cumi" break through their very necessary insularity is in distributing their analysis so that others might fathom how misogyny has been integrated into the mechanisms of politics, economics, religion and culture in their own communities. Their work has resulted in an important addition to the feminist corpus and as a resource for other women's groups. Through this articulation of the ways in which misogyny functions the women of "Talitha Cumi" aspire to encourage others to begin the process of exiting from the cultural practices that contain them to subordinated positions by gleaning the range of possibilities in analysis, praxis and identity.¹⁰⁵ Their call is for women to change: to move from passivity and indifference that allow systems and structures to remain intact to challenge notions of knowledge that undergird injustice. Even as primarily a theological group their project intones overt political action as the means to forcing political and social transformation.

In the shift to attend to the difficulties facing the environment "Talitha Cumi" moves into a realm that is simultaneously less convincing and less accessible for many women and where the boundaries of emancipated religious practices and beliefs become obscured.¹⁰⁶ They spiritualize the natural world, applying gender identities that end in a mystification of nature. The gendering process that they rejected in their earlier work finds a place in nature without attention to the parallel process undertaken by the Church to assign qualities to women and men. By engaging in a procedure of formalizing gender identities they risk compromising both their theory and their

¹⁰⁵ Talitha Cumi, p. 6.
¹⁰⁶ ibid, p. 13.
methods undercutting their critical political efficacy.

Still, their endeavour to create a democratically functioning Church that would allow for a diversity of expressions and beliefs remains a constant.\textsuperscript{107} Ideally they imagine the possibility of a Church that would be inclusive of indigenous gods and practices; of emancipated divinities from the natural world; and, a Church that would centre on the lives of the non-ordained. They do note nevertheless how distant the Church is from that ideal and how little the process to its attainment can be achieved particularly when those who have assigned themselves the role of emancipation (liberation theologians) are resistant to a critique invoking gender.\textsuperscript{108}

For these Latin American feminists theology is brought into feminist theory and analysis where its transformation occurs outside the strictures of the institutional Church but not necessarily outside the parameters of the needs of the community. The difference in the liberation theology of Gutiérrez is his contrasting methodological course. Here emancipatory ideals are additions to a theology that remains largely unaltered or unaffected by social critique.

**María Pilar Aquino**

*María Pilar Aquino*’s work is like a bridge joining two dissonant borders. As a theologian she has much in common with the earlier Gutiérrez but with the addition of a feminist foundation although not one that will alienate the structures on which mainstream liberation theology is built. Hers is not the pushing of critique to demand both recognition and transformation to the degree that the women of “Talitha Cumi” advance, nor is she as daring theologically by undertaking an

\textsuperscript{107} p.11.

\textsuperscript{108} p. 7.
analysis of sexuality. Instead, Aquino has constructed a theology that seems not to wield strong reactions from any quarter. She finds a theological site that can be critical but is inclusive of males and more status quo theological methods and hermeneutics. She writes for Mexicans but also for hispanics living in the United States. She speaks as a Latin American woman, and yet is integrated into North American academia as a teacher of theology. Therefore her role, like so many hispanic women living on the geographical and feminist divide, is to bridge the discomforting tensions caused by countries of vastly different intentions, theological mandates of different colourings and conflicting cultures that shift in their capacity to provide openings or to censure emancipation in order to maintain the status quo.

Aquino views theology as the individual's "self-understanding in relation to God's mystery."109 In other words, theology aids in clarifying human experiences so that humans are able to discern by what standards they ought to construct their moral lives. Faith follows from this as representative of the relationship between the individual and the divine as that individual strives to live according to the responsibilities understood as the conditions of that relationship.

As a feminist, Aquino dismisses the cultural control that allocates authority to men to validate the worth of women. Instead, women are encouraged to supersede male authority by establishing a direct link to God that they themselves will interpret in order for them to retrieve the "dignity" lost to them through centuries of enforced subordination.110 Unfortunately while this removes men from being defined as holding an authority guaranteed by God to make judgemental


110 Aquino, p. 84.
pronouncements on women's lives and decisions, it fails to rescue images of God rooted in patriarchal ideologies that reaffirm hierarchies of knowledge and gender. Its strength may not be enough to combat the pervasiveness of misogyny in society. Although Aquino suggests that once the authority to go through men to discern God's meaning is eliminated, women are freer to reposition their relationships based on equality rather than who has the legitimate right to sanction the word of God. In this way the purview through which women organize their lives holds great potentiality for women to understand that knowledge to be credible need not flow from the traditional mechanisms of authority to have meaning. Looking to God as opposed to men, according to Aquino, offers an alternative through which women can reconstruct their lives without fear of having committed a deleterious act against their families or society. It is a means through which women can justify a way of living in variance to the traditional impulses demanded by an androcentric focused society.\textsuperscript{111}

Where Gutiérrez has diminished the importance of experience to give precedence to the authority of intellectual thought generated through the magisterium, Aquino, and feminists theologians in general remain committed to the importance of experience as the primary informing act through which theology is then articulated. This does not suggest necessarily that feminists are reinventing yet another version of an essentialized poor woman but rather that experience can be used as a tool not only by the individual who has acted in this experience, but by others around her, including feminists working on theories of domination, who can use this experience to secure

\textsuperscript{111} ibid, p. 9.
new theoretical positions on the means by which injustice is permeated throughout society.\textsuperscript{112} The formulating of theologies as Aquino views it, is the outcome of coming to a descriptive understanding of experience in relation to how God's will is perceived to judge such issues. For this reason Aquino contends that theology can only emerge as a second act to experience. Her methodology is not really much different from traditional theology in its reliance on the discernment of God's will to justify their work in what appears to be a perpetual struggle by theologians to name themselves as the true arbitrators of God's will. It is here that her method is not as radical as for instance the women of "Talitha Cumi" who are less interested in "discerning" the will of God than in the creation of a method and theology exempt of all forms of hierarchy.

And while liberation is painfully delayed, Aquino sees women moving into spheres where before they had only marginal access forcing the exposure of new knowledges in both the Church and civil society.\textsuperscript{113} Such changes according to Aquino are the outcome of women, through examining the conditions of their lives, arriving at a level of consciousness that shifts their perception of who they are in response to their traditional positions in political and economic

\textsuperscript{112} See Paula Moya's discussion of experience and critical interpretation in "Postmodernism, `Realism,' and the Politics of Identity: Cherrie Moraga and Chicana Feminism," in Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures, ed., M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 136. Moya writes, "'Experience,' in this essay, refers to the fact of personally observing, encountering, or undergoing a particular event or situation. By this definition experience is admittedly subjective. Experiences are not wholly external events; they do not just happen. Experiences happen to us, and it is our theoretically mediated interpretation of an event that makes it an 'experience.' The meanings we give our experiences are Inescapably conditioned by the ideologies and 'theories' through which we view the world. But what is at stake in my argument is not that experience is theoretically mediated, but rather that experience in its mediated form contains a 'cognitive component' through which we can access knowledge to the world."

\textsuperscript{113} Aquino, p. 21.
systems. The problem, as Aquino views it, is the meagre number of women who have been able either to dodge or dismantle the obstructions placed in their way. Even while legislation (usually the result of extensive lobbying on the part of women's groups) can order changes in civil society there are no means to its enforcement in the domain of individuals' private lives. Cultural practices and attitudes outweigh the force of laws that have little presence in areas outside of juridical or police control. Often governments, human rights advocates, development agencies and liberation theologians use women as emblematic samples of the condition of life for the poor in general without having examined the reality of women's lives that indicates extenuating factors in the degree of oppression women face. As Aquino sees it, legislative changes then are only a partial victory for women and a vulnerable one at that as long as relationships of all kinds deny women the right to function as full and autonomous individuals in all spheres of life without identity being predicated on their biology.

While Aquino's work has perhaps more in common with the work of Gutiérrez as he was earlier, the distinguishing feature is her adamancy to remain as a scholar intimately concerned with social conditions analyzed through the social sciences. This refusal to dismiss the importance of analysis allows her a certain degree of intellectual autonomy from the institutional Church. As is the case with other feminist theologians covered in this chapter, Aquino sets her gaze on women,

---

114 p.17

115 p. 24

116 p. 40

their struggles, their needs, and their emancipatory projects shaping a theology better suited to them rather than the converse of bending emancipatory programs to coincide with the aims of the institutional Church. The type of analysis Aquino formulates provokes an interpretative source through which historical memories take on a defined political intent impelling women to understand themselves as a formidable "social force."

By linking her methodology through the social sciences Aquino distinguishes how traditional so called non-gendered liberation theology has failed to observe, learn from, support and expand on the religious experiences of women. Aquino contends that women's absence in the work of leading liberation theologians supports the contention that the poor, while being touted as the inspiration of these theologians' earlier work, have not in reality been accepted as having the appropriate kind of knowledge to be included in the formalization of theological premises. This may suggest that liberation theologians are not accepting of the validity of the practices commonly associated with popular religion or how individuals establish meaning through religion. In contrast, Aquino's claim rests in a commitment to exposing the limitations inherent within mainstream liberation theology that fails to incorporate the insights provided by the social sciences.

Aquino has observed that when given the opportunity to do so women engage in religion with their bodies, their intellects and their emotions in contrast to institutional practice where each of these human capacities is assigned a place on a hierarchy according to value and gender as though each can be mechanically separated from the other. "Reality and symbol are understood by the

---

118 Aquino, p. 19

119 ibid, p. 64.
mind and heart. Past, present and future are fused..."120 For a feminist theologian like Aquino the objective is less one of heroic venture into the public sphere than one of creating in women the confidence and freedom to know who they are and who they might choose to become.121

Much of the culpability in women's subjugation, suggests Aquino, resides with the Church in both its overt and unknowing complicity in the subordination of women. As a result, in her work, Aquino seeks to "unravel [the] androcentric and patriarchal dogma" found in both Church and state in their justification of women's alienation. The frustration women experience comes from being denied access to the core of the institution although women have been the Church's most loyal supporters. Women have had theological dogma imposed on them without being allowed the opportunity to contribute their own insights or for that matter be ordained as priests.122 Aquino believes the Church must now not only admit its guilt in women's subjugation but give to women what has been denied them throughout the Church's history.123

In fundamental ways, the Church has established its practices and theologies so as to eliminate the presence of women from the echelons of power.124 The archetype for a better society, or a more faithful people has been predicated on patriarchal conceptions of Christianity's own mandates for society using the example of women as stellar models of faith. Christologies, rather than being liberating impetuses for women have ignored the specificities of women's lives or the

120 p. 61.
121 p. 67.
122 p. 126.
123 p. 71.
124 p. 140.
political function of gender. As Aquino explains, context should be the principal starting place in the formulation of relevant Christian models. The problem rests in a Church that has claimed its theologies as universal truths not admitting to its own shaping of theology to contend with social and political motives. Aquino's placing of context as central not only forces the focus on those who require the Church to address the conditions of their lives, but illumines the ways in which universal claims work to erase the legitimacy of specific lives.

Aquino's vision for the Church includes its transformation into a democratic one exempt of hierarchies of exclusion operating according to the needs and desires of the participants in a process she labels as "ecclesiocentrism". Through this democratizing process, Aquino proposes that important symbols like Mary are more likely to lose their patriarchal girding shifting from being objects of adoration or worship to becoming multi-dimensional figures supportive of liberative aims. In the reworking of images like Mary, templates that limit women's identities but function as cultural determinism are dissolved of their oppressive power.

Aquino's aims are certainly worthy but there remains a degree of naivety stemming from her loyalty to a Church that has demonstrated its resistance in its capacity to allow change in its function of authority. Here I think of Gutiérrez who perhaps hoped to negotiate two poles with a few references to gender and race that would satisfy those who criticized him for their absence without threatening the Vatican's stand in either of these directions. The references only acknowledge that others are working in those areas but Gutiérrez incorporates none of their fully

125 p. 170.
126 p. 174.
127 p. 182.
developed theoretical and methodological contributions in his own work. My point is that Aquino's desire for a democratic Church, while worthy is unlikely to be negotiated without serious compromises. If, for instance Gutiérrez were in fact to take on a critique of the function of gender and race he would be confronted with critiquing the basis on which the Church is established. Here he would meet what Leonardo Boff experienced for having critiqued the oppressive dominating features of the Church, the disciplinary powers of the institution demonstrating the extent to which the hierarchy is resistant to democratizing forces.

Aquino's vision for the Church is not only naive but flawed when those who work on issues of liberation are retreating into the institution limiting the potential for theory and method.

Gutiérrez has inadvertently confirmed the status quo found in the Church through his totalizing of identity into objective form, taking from an institution steeped in patriarchal practices the analysis he needs to defend his theological and social positions thus denying the community a place to speak and develop new courses. The importance in this is seeing the divergent directions Gutiérrez and feminist theologians like Aquino, Bidegain and Gebara and Bingemar have gone in asserting liberatory aims. He shifts his gaze from community and what community might accomplish in the political and social realm to the individual and the individual's relationship to the teachings of the Church. In contrast, feminist theologians, albeit through divergent means are more apt to denounce all links to authoritarian practices that arrest the legitimacy of others to insert their knowledge into the institutions and systems that are purportedly present to serve them.

While the work of feminist theologians is not exempt from critique they do push liberatory discourse further than Gutiérrez. They are more willing to deconstruct the domination found in institutions like the Church, in theology, and in social relations. Aquino's approach is the closest
in many ways to that of the younger Gutiérrez. She holds his same hope that women, in her case, are and will be the transforming mediatrix of the Church. And while the institution has made some minor inroads in allowing women greater participation during mass, women on the whole remain excluded from the places where vital decisions are made. With this present papacy there is little evidence that the Vatican is ready to alter its course on issues of primary importance to women. Changes of any significance tend to be localized and implemented on the advice and willingness of the priest, bishop and church members. On key issues of reproductive control and the priesthood the Vatican remains staunchly resistant to negotiation.

Aquino's methodology patterns that of Gutiérrez's in its lack of clarity of how faith communities integrate the results of their theological enterprises. Unlike "Talitha Cumi" where religion and feminism are not simply articulated but consolidated into the lives of the participants. Aquino does not illuminate the ways in which oppression functions in forms not visible but still forcefully blended into cultural practices. She does not explore oppression's presence in language, identity formation, employment practices, relationships in the family and the community or in the development of ideologies. Without this type of formative analysis, liberative intents are undercut by a less than fully developed understanding of what people need to be liberated from. Her less satisfactory critique coincides with the absence of a probing of the major theological treatises that rest on particular images of both God and Jesus, who without reworking remain located in the mechanisms that justify patriarchy. This hesitation or perhaps even fear to disrupt the tradition of what God and Jesus represent in the Church on the part of feminists is troubling when viewed against their willingness if not eagerness to rework the image of Mary. The response that Mary's positioning to humanity allows for more flexibility is simply too weak an argument to combat the
extensiveness of misogyny found in Christianity's history. The theologians covered to this point have all been Latin Americans. All would claim that their work is informed by the Conquest which did more than secure land for the reigning monarchs in Spain and Portugal. It conquered communities of people leaving them as vassals in their own land. The Conquest created a new "class" of people of both indigenous and Spanish origin but not fully of either. Mestizos who carry the history of both their Spanish (therefore also Moor) and indigenous heritage are, in some respects, the most visible reminders of the Conquest's influence. The social and ideological renderings are even more complex in countries such as Brazil where Africans were brought as slaves to sit at the base of a hierarchy that assigned them virtually no human value. In the next section on Ada María Isasi-Díaz, the idea of conquest is enlarged by taking on a different metaphoric meaning when situated within the context of exile where the strains of dominating powers force different forms of oppression on communities of latinas/os.

Ada María Isasi-Díaz

For Ada María Isasi-Díaz, a Cuban feminist theologian now teaching and publishing in the United States, mestizaje, or this combining of ethnic and racial roots, is a central pivot from which the historical bearings of Latin Americans' past and present are examined. Mestizaje holds political meaning and aims particularly when employed as a fluid term, encompassing the currency of new historical movements that have brought Latin Americans to the United States where they exist in constant tension against the dominant culture.

Both Conquest and mestizaje hold new metaphoric value among Latinas/os in the United States as they gaze on the social conditions of African Americans, indigenous peoples and immigrants
from around the world only to see how the United States' own mythology of itself as the moral adjudicator for all other countries (often for immigrants' homelands) and the nation where any citizen, regardless of origin can secure opportunities collides with the reality of poverty and lack of opportunity.128

Isasi-Diaz's work is a necessary addition to the latina liberatory corpus. She works primarily with Latin American women living in the United States but from Puerto Rico, Cuba and Mexico. All the women who form part of her theological discussion groups are struggling to survive conditions that challenge standard conceptions of morality found in the Church and in society in general. What Isasi-Diaz has developed is a feminist liberation theology that is cognizant of community, identity, social justice, and the importance of experience but what she adds is a self-reflexive criticism allowing her to invert the critique on her own positioning as a latina feminist theologian bridging questions of elitism, subordination, culture, and political and religious ideologies. Her work is unique not only in its uncompromising feminism within theology and its attention to social critique but for its inclusion of women's voices and interpretations on social conditions.

Her published works are expressly written to challenge those who are neither latina/o nor mujerista on how cultural and religious values and practices function to marginalize others not marked as insiders.129 Her critique is directed at theologians, social activists, institutions and


129 Mujer means woman in spanish. When Isasi-Díaz uses "mujerista" she is referring to a woman of spanish speaking cultural origin who is engaging in an emancipatory religious and life process while always remembering her cultural ties to her latina/o community. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, En La Lucha In the Struggle: Elaborating a mujerista theology, (Minneapolis: Fortress
society as a whole demanding they assume responsibility for their complicity in the subordination of latinas/os. Her principal concern is in how knowledge/power has been utilised to admit or obstruct peoples from experiencing the full advantages of a democratic society. She traces the use of knowledge to the places of power like the Church that determines the moral parameters of life for its adherents. She contests this claimed right to hold theological and moral proprietorship over others without engaging in a reciprocal relationship that acknowledges the immense complexities of life that limit choices. "Our mission is to challenge oppressive structures which refuse to allow us to be full members of society while preserving our distinctiveness as Hispanic women." Instead, because of the Church's continual betrayal of human agency she claims this institution can no longer reflect accurately the complex religious sentiments of people who have been subjected to a multitude of authoritarian rules in all areas of social organization. In outlining her method, its aims, and how women describe the conditions of their lives Isasi-Diaz aspires to reveal how economic systems are justified when mediated through a network of ideological systems established by such institutions as theological schools and Churches.


130 Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "The Task of Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology -- Mujeristas: Who We Are and What We Are About," in Feminist Theology for the Third World A Reader, ed., Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 89. The tone of Isasi-Díaz's writing is much like women's testimonies (Rigoberta Menchu) where the published product is meant to inform but admonish the reader for failing to understand how even unconscious webs of domination function in the whole system of oppression that result in further suffering for those marginalized.


132 En La Lucha, p. 40.
Ideologies, in this case, function as the source through which economic, political and social structures and relations are justified by those who wield power. In this system that homogenizes identity, judgement is levelled on those who refuse or are unable to secure similar benefit for themselves as the ruling ideology insists because their colour, their origin, and their economic status marks them as inadequately different. In the example of the United States, according to Isasi-Díaz, this tendency to assign people a status within a hierarchy that validates their contributions and worth to society is obscured behind a myth (to conjure nationalism) that claims opportunity under a rubric of liberal individualism placing the blame on the victims for their lack of economic and political success. Through education, politics, economics and culture the "correct" value systems are promoted at the expense of occluding the lives of those who are excluded by those features that mark them as different from white, so called non-cultured mainstream. Isasi-Díaz contends that white culture fails to grasp the myriad of ways in which it has control over how others in society are designated into categories that limit their access to opportunity all the while it perceives itself as the norm for civilized truth.

In the writings of Isasi-Díaz liberation theology loses its obscure conception of emancipation and the large descriptive sweeps at oppression. She cites concise examples present in the lives of individuals and communities demonstrating the vast differences of people's lives that necessitate

\[\text{\textsuperscript{133} ibid., pp. 22-28.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{134} p. 21.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{135} See Maria Lugones on this in "Purity, Impurity and Separation: Forum," in \textit{Signs} 19, no.2, 1994. In this article Lugones discusses white culture's fascination with the appropriation of the cultures of others it subordinates, while at the same time seeing itself as pure.}\]
divergent responses and methods. In all her work there is an adamant resistance to judge women by the decisions made under circumstances where survival was at risk.

Isasi-Díaz understands oppression to be composed of three interrelated "modes" each working in conjunction with the others. First is domination - the result of

racist/ethnic and sexist prejudices; second is subjugation which has to do with the creation of oppressed subjects according to these prejudices and thirdly exploitation and repression that are the result of societal institutions, economical mechanisms, and the state apparatuses.

The real insidiousness of oppression lies in its capacity to imbue itself into people's internal make-up. Thus, people invariably are exposed whether they are conscious of it or not to two contesting forces. One consisting of the memories of centuries of oppression recognized as unjust subverted through such benign sounding actions like foot dragging or through more overtly organized forms like social movements; and secondly, but entirely opposite to the first, the ways in which oppression has been infused into identities.

Essentially Isasi-Díaz is deconstructing the forms through which people are denied justice in political, social, economic and cultural systems. Her contention is not to claim equality with others who wield power, rather the task of a mujerista is to demand the transformation of systems.

---

136 These citations are in the voices of the women themselves. Isasi-Díaz and Yolanda Tarango in Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) use a testimonial recording technique of which excerpts are included in this book and Isasi-Díaz's later book, En La Lucha.

137 En La Lucha, p. 150.

138 En La Lucha, p. 16.

139 For an interesting study on how these two forces work see Jean Comaroff's Body of Power Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985).
and structures that unfairly privilege some over others. For immigrants, and people of colour living in the United States, these systems and structures are established for the benefit of those already privileged but contained under an ideological myth claiming that hard work and capitalist inventiveness are the only two prerequisites to entrance into privilege. However, the key to access is more than working hard; those classed as poor must also be willing and able to transform themselves to mirror the cultural and social make-ups of those considered successful losing the markers that have defined them as having a culture but also as being somewhat less "civilized." The transformation demanded if not verbally then through silent but powerful social indicators, is difficult for women whose very identities are caught on class, race and sex discrimination. Relationships at every economic level assess the extent to which women are abiding to large determinations of what a "good woman" must represent. For Latin American women residing in the United States, they must contend with their own patriarchal culture that through language, body, and social relations informs them where along the measuring line between Mary and Eve they exist. In terms of their lives in the United States women are judged as operating outside the standards established by the normative culture.

The Catholic Church has played a large part in determining normative identities by assuming the position of the arbiter of morality. By resting its statements on the magisterium that the


Church asserts was created by "Christ the Lord to enlighten conscience," it dictates in questions of appropriate behaviour and identity.\textsuperscript{143} What follows from this is a re-assertion of the infallibility of the Pope. These claims of divine authority privileging the authority of the Church above the right of others to assert their moral agency autonomously allows the Church to demand obedience from its laity on questions of morality. Being a good catholic means then, compliance and not freedom of thought and conscience.\textsuperscript{144} Such rigidity in the sphere of morality produces the impression that those not close enough to God physically through the hierarchy of the institution, or educated to be legitimate moral, thinking, feeling agents on their own, require the guidance from those who have been granted legitimated authority.

First, if obedience is the main virtue of an authoritarian conscience, then it is 'blind' obedience that the hierarchy of the Church believes it has the right and duty to demand from Catholics today. Second, one of the main tenets of the authoritarian conscience is the fundamental inequality between the one in a position of authority and the rest of us.\textsuperscript{145}

Isasi-Díaz confirms that women are choosing to practice religion outside the institution precisely because of the Church's rigid moral hold on their lives that fails to credit women who contribute to the survival of their families and communities particularly as those actions or decisions challenge normative standards of behaviour.\textsuperscript{146} The problem lies in a Church that assumes it is the final arbitrator over moral standards for all human existence without acknowledging the diversity among human beings or the political and economic obstacles obstructing the realm of choices

\textsuperscript{143} Isasi-Díaz quoting, Pope John Paul II, p. 143.

\textsuperscript{144} p. 142.

\textsuperscript{145} p. 145.

\textsuperscript{146} For examples of women's decisions to leave the Church or participate in it only from a distance see examples of their testimonies in Isasi-Díaz's La Lucha.
women might have under different circumstances. In the end, Isasi-Díaz believes that freedom for women can be attained only in distancing themselves from an institution that blocks critical thinking.

Such independence is secured by women gathering knowledge about their historical pasts and placing it in a context of critique from within social and political contours.

Those who are influential in society are not our models. Their reasons for success are not our reasons. In other words, we Latinas do not find our understandings and values reflected in those of society. Our values are not part of the societal norm and are not, therefore, validated by society. But our lack of participation in setting what is normative in society results in more than mere lack of validation. Not only have we been excluded from shaping and interpreting the norms as well as the principles and institutions of society according to our own experience, but those norms, principles and societal institutions have been shaped and interpreted against us, in order to exclude and to exploit us.147

Isasi-Díaz names this critical process the "proyecto historico" through which women unearth their histories and begin to recognize themselves as individuals who are crossing racial, economic, social, political and geographical boundaries that have held them as ideological prisoners.148 The process allows them to reach into their collective histories to assess the past under a new corpus of critical theory and hopefully dispel the "apathy and fear" that has become an arresting feature in people's lives. Once these obstacles are dealt with, Isasi-Díaz believes that women will encounter the means to respond politically.149

The realization of liberation in the work of Isasi-Díaz is not theologically restrained by some mysterious divine being. Her view is that liberation is really an expression of freedom, that is to

147 La Lucha, p. 174.
148 ibid., p. 34ff.
149 p. 156.
say the freedom to express one's religious sensibilities, but more than this a freedom to think independently of hierarchical structures and institutions so that "others are not acting upon" those with less authority and power of resistance.\textsuperscript{150} For her, "theology is not so much about God as about how we understand and relate to God."\textsuperscript{151} In the emancipatory method of the \textit{mujerista}, liberation is closely linked with social ethics through which Isasi-Díaz strives to preserve and encourage growth in the community in order that the liberation sought is one that includes the entire community through which all members grow to understand themselves as responsible moral agents.\textsuperscript{152}

In recognizing diversity within any one community Isasi-Díaz seeks not to normalize another form of liberatory homogeneity or praxis, nor is her project a petition to claim equality within existent systems. Diversity can be maintained only when systems that survive through the subservience of other groups are toppled. Therefore, Isasi-Díaz's vision of liberation is a critically cognizant goal of intentionality as individuals within a community reject prejudice in favour of a freedom that links itself with justice.\textsuperscript{153} The process involves learning to observe oppression through a form of critical theory and through collective political and social action. In her methodology, critique, discussion and action are not separated units but rather elements that intersect one another persistently as a means to avoid the reifying of purposes, identities or the censure of ideas and actions.

\textsuperscript{150} p. 195.

\textsuperscript{151} p. 175.

\textsuperscript{152} p. 37.

\textsuperscript{153} \textit{La Lucha}, p. 37. For a discussion on intentionality see p. 173.
Isasi-Diaz situates her definition of liberation within the community without attaching undue essentialist notions that obscure the inequalities that occur internally. While her primary attention is on the liberation of women, her own work and social responsibilities carry her outside the community demanded in part because of her geographical location in a country of diverse ethnic groups and pressures. First she encourages latina activists to forge links with other groups contesting their marginalization. More interestingly though, she directs her critique to those social activists participating in latina/os struggles but not of hispanic origin.\textsuperscript{154} She demands that these individuals examine how their own privileges have been built on the alienation of others. Solidarity, she maintains must be based on a stance that rejects all patronizing affiliations and links to apparatuses that flourish by privileging one group over another. In yet another twist of analysis, Isasi-Diaz extends her examination to the professional (her position) who by nature of the individual's more elitist location indicates a certain degree of compliance with hierarchical practices and ideologies.\textsuperscript{155} Although Isasi-Diaz never completely discloses how separation from hierarchical structures can be achieved, she does posit that professionals hold a responsibility to manipulate the structures and resources available to them for the benefit of the community. She critiques the Church and its seminaries for their control over the production of knowledge and their power as that knowledge becomes dispersed in society. Instead she asserts that theological methods like her own need to be inserted into their practices in order to establish more diverse knowledge and methodological grounds that recognize the validity of the contributions of


\textsuperscript{155} \textit{La Lucha}, p. xii.
In what seems unavoidable in liberatory discourses, Isasi-Díaz also seems to slip into utopic notions of possibilities of a future without adequately addressing how the Church or any other institution or culture at large may unleash powerful responses that reflect their own resistance to accept change. Small advances by liberatory groups may in the end only be against economic and political pressures that imbue themselves at a social level. Isasi-Díaz while clear on the present oppressions never fully discloses the extent to which resistance might also be a part of the maintenance of the status quo. Any liberatory discourse must contain a certain element of hope to gather support. However it must also be accompanied by a realist theory of how that project will unfold.

In spite of the weaknesses in her project, Isasi-Díaz, of all the theologians male or female covered in this work, has been the most consistent in incorporating the principles and methods inherent in liberation theology. Because of this integrity that forms the basis on her personal production of *mujerista* texts, her demand that others in positions of privilege do likewise avoids sounding vacuous. Her books work on several levels. Each chapter contains a summary in Spanish as if to say to latinas that they must know and have access to what she is saying about them to a mainly white middle class population. And, unlike Gutiérrez, or the other feminist theologians reviewed above, Isasi-Díaz, albeit in modified form, includes the statements of *latina/mujerista* women as a way of impressing not only how her own stance has been informed by these women but of their diversity and capacity to think and act. This diversity is also reflected in how these women define the major Christian symbols and images often conflicting with that of the

---

156 p. 71
institutional Church. Unlike other work by liberation theologians, Isasi-Díaz does not aspire to undercut diversity for coherence of thought and experience. This includes the importance of her own silence on the theological interpretations women expound that sit as foils to the opinions of the Church and perhaps her own as well. While homogeneity of thought is not forced on women, there is a form of coherency sought between Isasi-Díaz's mujerista principles and her work in whatever form it takes that accepts that the manufacturing of knowledge should emanate from the women whose liberation is sought. Isasi-Díaz and her colleague Yolanda Tarango who worked together as the facilitators among a group of gathered latinas, situate themselves as the theological technicians whose training allows them to access methods and resources for emancipatory discussion while the other women are recognized as the theologians contributing the content.  

In shifting the emphasis of the theologian to the nonprofessional, Isasi-Díaz and Tarango issue a challenge to the institution to relinquish its power over legitimizing knowledge and moral agency. The problem in her method, one which also concerns Isasi-Díaz, is how even the shifting of labels fails to alter perceptions of marginalized people in the media, in work or in personal encounters. Notwithstanding these very real and disconcerting problems her work continues to probe new areas for action and critique as it seeks to secure liberation for latinas and their communities by divulging the ways in which power is used to limit freedom of thought and

---

157 Once again it is not evident from the material provided how well this process works and the extent to which Isasi-Díaz and Tarango are in fact technicians and not leaders in the presentation of liberatory ideals and analysis. I question whether it would make better sense to claim a title that suggests their leadership to demonstrate a stronger sense of their actual roles. See Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Yolanda Tarango, Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church (Minneapolis: Fortress Books, 1992), p. 109.

158 La Lucha, p. 188.
movement in their lives.

Gutiérrez is less clear on what society should look like in a liberated state than Isasi-Díaz. His obscurity stems from his conviction that real liberation can be realized only through God's intervention although the timing and method of such a moment is a mystery. Isasi-Díaz is not content to rely on the mystery of God's intents. In Gutiérrez's definition of liberation, the coming of God or the settling of God's kingdom is implied. For Isasi-Díaz a kingdom is simply a re-entrenchment of a hierarchy in need of abolishment. In her re-working of the concept she dissolves the hierarchy component and settles on a community living and practising justice. In "kin-dom" she can better address the importance and responsibility of humanity to work in solidarity with one another striving toward a society exempt of domination rather than relying on God's indiscernible mystery. Through a kin-dom the right of all peoples to claim equality is enjoined with the responsibility of society to work toward its fulfilment without undermining human endeavours through the controlling power of a deity. "For us, salvation occurs in history and is intrinsically connected to our liberation."

Feminist theologians speak about the importance of theology uniting body, intellect and heart so as to better reflect how latinatas themselves experience and live out their religious belief systems. Their relationships with the deity tend to be personal reflecting the struggles that confront them on a daily basis that allows them to express a wide range of emotions from rage at God's failure to intervene on the part of a victim in times of despair, to a thankfulness for intervention during

155 ibid., p. 35.

160 p. 35.
moments of dire need. In Gutiérrez's work no allowance is made for a relationship based on the spectrum of human experiences and perceptions of God's lack of attention. In the work of Isasi-Díaz and "Talitha Cumi" in particular, emotions are not disengaged from the intellect but instead recognized as an essential component of how humans arrive at knowledge. Gutiérrez tends not to address how humans' experience and interpretation is mediated by feeling and intellect or how these in conjunction with one another might lead toward a more profound commitment to political and religious causes. Nor does he account for the role expressions of emotion play in gauging the quality of people's lives, their understanding of it and how such emotion could be amassed for use in political contestation. Gutiérrez speaks about the immense mystery of God and God's solidarity with the poor, but God remains largely an unapproachable figure when defined against the brutalities women may face in their daily lives especially in the deity's mediation through the misogyny of the Church. While Gutiérrez's conception of God maintains the image of a caring but distant deity, Isasi-Díaz stresses the importance of a deity that appears present in daily struggles so that women may express freely the profundity of their lives cognizant of the presence of a deity that intimately attunes itself to their despair.

The annotated testimonies include in her work of the women Isasi-Díaz has interviewed over the course of several years demonstrates how in fact individuals alter the identities of religious figures to best comply with the conditions of their experience. Some envision God in mother terms, others discount the father image entirely, or reconceptualize Jesus into more of a brother

---

161 p. 39.

162 p. 39.
figure while others seek out Mary for her approachability.\textsuperscript{163} For most, the personal and daily contact with a deity here on earth contains profounder religious importance than reviewing scriptural passages or, establishing how Jesus could be refashioned to suit their lives as women struggling for emancipation.\textsuperscript{164} Most significant, however, is the number of women who contend the Church has been not simply negligent in their lives but destructive in its imposition of value judgements affecting their daily life.

Isasi-Díaz describes latina/o culture as having a "religious subculture that is a way of thinking and acting in their religious sphere not as individuals but as a group of persons...."\textsuperscript{165} Therefore, the meaning behind religious practices including rituals and sacraments is reworked to reflect the interpretations of their histories as latinas/os.\textsuperscript{166} The alternative meanings applied to religious practices operate to strengthen the cultural identity of the group. This function has particular value for the survival of the community when confronted by a dominating culture not of their own making as latinas/os experience in the United States. Alternate interpretations or meanings contest what the institution deems as "sacred truth" that neglects to view such variances as a way of increasing and responding to people's religious faith.\textsuperscript{167} Regardless, the practice of applying

\textsuperscript{163} Isasi-Díaz and Tarango, pp. 20-47.

\textsuperscript{164} La Lucha, p. 46.

\textsuperscript{165} p. 47.

\textsuperscript{166} p. 47.

\textsuperscript{167} Speaking about the intolerance of the church is difficult considering how its existence has been predicated on syncretism. I would therefore suggest that intolerance is dependent on who the current pope or local bishop is, the region under review and the type of religious practices prevalent. In this case, variances are too clearly linked with liberation theology and therefore at odds with the papacy of John Paul II.
meaning against the institution's interpretations is not generally viewed as a serious threat by the Church, as long as such alternatives remain silent and powerless within the context of popular religion.

The history of Christianity shows that orthodox objections to syncretism have less to do with the purity of faith, and more to do with who has the right to determine what is to be considered normative and official.  

Isasi-Díaz's work pushes both feminist and liberation theology into areas not yet explored. Her work certainly surpasses that of Gutiérrez's for her critical clarity on what it means as a theologian to practice liberatory ideals, her reworking of kin-dom, and her definition of liberation. Her focus is distinct in that her principal concern is for the recovery of women's moral agency. As she sees it, how moral agency is assumed into a form of action is informed by women's experiences in the Church, their economic and social conditions as well as their perception of their own emancipation. As mujeristas, they examine the decisions women have been impelled to make and from this unravel the tentacles of power that have created lives of struggle for women. While not all decisions made by mujeristas are liberating, particularly when conditions force women into oppressive conditions like prostitution but the context of these so called decisions are important revealers to the obstacles women face in order to survive. Through this process of examination, Isasi-Díaz glimpses those ruptures where women are challenging if not also rejecting normative standards of evaluation.

The difficulty for all liberation theologians appears to be in how to shift their attention from theology to effective but collective liberative praxis beyond the discussions of the group itself. Isasi-Díaz's contribution to the question of praxis lies in her reworking of Gutiérrez's original

\[168\] La Lucha, p. 51.
schema of the manner in which praxis informs theology. She proposes that since individuals begin
with a theological position, theology and praxis are not separate entities as Gutiérrez implies.
Rather she sees them as part of an integrated whole; the results of which allows both theology and
praxis to remain in constant and consolidated interaction.¹⁶⁹ This integrative process of
consolidating theory and praxis is sustained at both an intellectual level and at a level that sees
emancipative decisions being carried out in the community. For Isasi-Díaz, women's individual
acts (but with focus still on the preservation of the community) can be emancipative as women act
as moral agents free from institutional and cultural constraints. In part, praxis relies on individuals
being both self-critical and self-determining.

The diversity among women, the influences and pressures that render their lives and identities
different from one another is a primary concern of Isasi-Díaz. Her objective is to dispel the notion
of homogeneity among women or among women who share national origins. In doing this she
diverges from the way in which CEBS appear to function by illustrating how variant emancipatory
processes must be among people to preserve the diversity of human experiences and capacities.
"...what we need to do to embrace diversity is to engage each other respectfully and to integrate
each other's understandings of reality into our own."¹⁷⁰ She also demonstrates the importance of
creating a space where women can articulate their differences without fear of reprisal or rejection
from the group. In not disclosing or allowing for differences in method, commitment and
judgement the emancipatory project risks impeding those who might participate as well as
becoming yet another venue through which authoritarian practices might be fortified.

¹⁶⁹ ibid., p. 155.
¹⁷⁰ p. 192
Feminist theologians, in their goal to focus on women without collapsing analysis into stultifying judgements, often end in creating a precarious tension between essentialist notions of women out of respect for the struggles poor women confront and the type of critique that exposes non-emancipatory activity albeit activity attached to the pressures of survival. There tends to be a hesitancy to make the distinction of what constitutes an act of survival from an act of liberatory aim; a distinction that is vital when designing the content of an emancipatory program in both theory and praxis. The solution may be situated in drawing together projects that attend to survival issues but are predicated on a critical divulging of all forms of domination. In this way, women can also work toward the emancipation of their communities without sacrificing either feminist principles or meaningful cultural identities. This method would still encourage "divergent thinking" that allows a multiplicity of voices to speak from a variety of subject positions while defining how a "politically empowering self" is created without endangering cultural values that exist externally to domination but that are essential to a community's survival.

Isasi-Díaz is the most discerning of all the feminists covered in this chapter in terms of her work actually practising feminist principles. By incorporating the ideas and voices of other women she undercuts the dominance of her own voice or its capacity to direct the emancipatory

---


choices of other women in her published work. In the transposing of the fragmented contents of women's voices into published form Isasi-Diaz and her colleague Tarango experiment with the possibilities of inclusive and divergent thinking. Through these transcripts what individual women think and why takes on added clarity as do the notions of community struggle and diversity.

The problem of how religion might be an impetus to emancipation seems to plague the work of all feminist liberation theologians. The entanglements of a long history of subjugation are never dealt with to the extent that it absolves catholicism of its real complicity in the oppression of peoples. There is ambivalence on how to shape a cohesive religious emancipatory project while attending to the diverse needs and choices of women who are struggling simply to survive.

Isasi-Diaz grants that the process is a long and difficult one often dependent on the energy and availability of an individual. Still, not even Isasi-Diaz dwells enough on what emancipatory changes mean for these women as they interact with families, friends, the community and political forces that might subject liberatory advancements to other stresses placing both women and their efforts at risk. This is not to say in the least that such activities should be censured but if analysis

---

173 Her inclusion of fragmented pieces of women's voices is however problematic as are all forms of testimonial writing in determining authorship and who makes the decisions in terms of subjects, and editing. Ultimately it is the transcriber, who functions as the interpreter of women's voices. For more on this see Latin American Perspectives: Voices of the Voiceless in Testimonial Literature Issue 70 Summer 1991 Volume 18, Number 3. Doris Sommer "'Nor Just a Personal Story': Women's Testimonios and the Plural Self," in Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography, eds., Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988). Amy K. Kaminsky, Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). For insights on ethnographic work when dealing with testimonials see Ruth Behar, Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

is to expose domination at every level it must also expose the pressures that result far too often in the termination of projects not carried through to completion. We have seen how Gebara and Bingemer's response is to find a moderate course of action rooted in what they discern as the pace of the community reflected in a feminism that only marginally challenges the fundamentals of religious icons and symbols. Gebara and Bingemer may also be seeking to uncover a route that avoids alienating people who are apt to turn away with a more radical version of feminism or change in general. Their intent is not to critique cultural beliefs but to secure them in more emancipatory trappings.

The difference in what Gebara and Bingemer undertake and what Gutiérrez does is situated in the primacy of authority and its conceptualization. Gutiérrez, in his most recent work calls for the "poor's" liberation but leaves them theologically and actively integrated in an institution that is exempt of egalitarian practices, whereas Gebara and Bingemer place authority in the community seeking to serve the interests of the constituency and not the institution allowing for far greater flexibility in the directions theology and praxis might evolve.

The shift in the primacy of the institution to community undercuts the traditional flow of knowledge allowing for new forms of theological method and legitimacy. In the work of Gutiérrez there is no major deviation from the traditional subject/object relationship common in much of mainstream theology. In his work, the status of his relationship to the community, developed to advance emancipation, is unclear. The extent to which this community has contributed ideas, opinions and values to his work is never acknowledged. Gutiérrez has built worrisome contradictions into his work by claiming liberation for a group but without permitting them full subjectivity in his own practice of liberation or allowing them autonomy from the
Church's moral and theological dictates. The difference in terms of choices and method is made that much more apparent in the work of Isasi-Diaz who writes on the conflicts caused by her academic position that simultaneously marks her as different internally and privileged externally in her community. Her responsibility, as she sees it, is to take the privilege accorded her from within the teaching academy and seek to challenge its solid hold on knowledge production and legitimation.

The critical question of spirituality that Gutiérrez is now emphasizing in his work at the loss of an analysis rooted in the social sciences, and the expense of community and praxis, is handled with more evenness in the work of the feminists covered in this chapter. These theologians view spirituality as a lived feature in the daily lives of women, not a doctored relationship of exclusion between the deity and the individual under the religious direction of the Church. Through living out spirituality in active ways of both individual and community value, feminists claim the mystery of God is discerned in such a manner that allows their faith to be a regenerating impulse in their struggle against oppressive conditions. Their avowal is that a spirituality disconnected from emancipatory analysis and praxis extinguishes political responsibility.

The history of Latin America is dominated by the forced conversion of peoples to the belief systems of those in power. Spirituality for Gutiérrez while not a conversion, is a return to the more traditional practices that are part of an institution that demands obedience to its authority. Gutiérrez's definition of spirituality does not open people to the world in new ways but collapses the contact and the possibilities for interaction by calling on the institution to act as the principal

175 I do recognize that within the Church itself there are different types of spirituality. Here I am concerned with a shift in Gutiérrez's thinking that limits spirituality to a relation with God disengaged from social responsibility.
arbitrator -- this in conjunction with his repudiation of class as a category of analysis. Under the authority of the Church, as Isasi-Díaz argues, women and men lose the freedom to claim their moral and intellectual agency; the very skills demanded to struggle against social and political injustices.

The women in this chapter are representative of the diversity of work being done in Latin American communities. According to Gloria Anzaldúa this diversity is pressuring the rupture of essentialist forms of thinking and their connections to hegemonic ideologies. However, these theologians must ensure that their theologies fulfil much more than the category of "good intentions," that in fact they become an impetus to "revolutionary action." While "Talitha Cumi," Bidegain and Isasi-Díaz are attempting to disclose all forms of domination, Gebara and Bingemer, and Aquino are closer to theologies of "good intentions" that exist to elicit emancipatory action but are stymied in their potentiality by romantic notions of the past and present practices of the people these theologians aspire to represent.

Furthermore, all these theologians neglect to view class, gender, and race as fluid categories. Rather their tendency is to define them as stagnant and unhindered by time and place. Far too frequently these categories for analysis are dealt with in static terms meaning that the results slip

---


178 See Ana Castillo in *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (New York: Plume, 1994). She says, "But by the sixteenth century, the imperialism of the Mexica Empire had evolved to the point where the primary role for woman was to serve male-ruled society." (p. 105).

into a common rhetoric devoid of clear conclusions in terms of present reality. Racism in particular is not addressed beyond some reference to indigenous practices or mestizo variations in the work of Isasi-Díaz. But an examination of racism that exposes how people come to be devalued in society by others and eventually themselves based on skin tone is crucial in understanding the complexity of Latin American women's lives and the function of oppression. Just as racism needs to be integrated further into their work, so too does class. It is no longer insightful to name these women as poor without claiming the ideologies that make them poor or the instruments of power that maintain their poverty. As Anzaldúa says, it is important that "theorists of color" devise "marginal theories" that exist "partially outside and partially inside the Western frame of reference...theories that overlap many worlds."180 This is what many feminist theologians appear to be considering in their work. Nonetheless, more attention to subjectivity, positioning, essentialism, sexuality as well as class, gender and racism is needed to ensure the continuing growth of these theologies and their worth among women. It means looking at the entire scope of domination in its macro forms as well as in those ways that seep into the pores of how people come to perceive themselves in relation to others.

---

180 Anzaldúa, p. xxv.
Conclusion

But an action which wants to serve man [sic] ought to be careful not to forget him on the way; if it chooses to fulfil itself blindly, it will lose its meaning or will take on an unforeseen meaning; for the goal is not fixed once and for all; it is defined all along the road which leads to it. Vigilance alone can keep alive the validity of the goals and the genuine assertion of freedom.1

Sustaining the type of critical social action from within Christian Base Communities that deepens knowledge on the function of oppression through gender, race and class has become increasingly problematic in liberation theology. Theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez, as I have contended throughout this work, have moved closer to the authority of the institutional Church thus implicitly acknowledging the greater authority of the magisterium to arbitrate the moral and religious lives of the faithful.2 Gutiérrez began his project of liberation asserting the primacy of social analysis in efforts to demonstrate how imported theologies of the past had failed to adjust themselves to the Latin American reality. Gutiérrez had hoped, by attuning his work to the histories of oppression found in Latin America, his theology would remain relevant to the lives of


those for whom theologies of the past had strong colonial ties. His analysis, unfortunately for the
growth of liberation theology, seems to have stagnated representing the broad, universal interests
of the Vatican rather than the specific conditions of Latin America. His theology no longer
embodies the political response once prominent in his work while social and economic conditions
continue to deteriorate for poor women and men. His statements, as chapter two demonstrates,
have lost their autonomy and with this their precision to articulate the specifics of people's
oppression thus eliminating a key factor in the liberatory process. With the erasure of an
autonomous analysis, Gutiérrez's hermeneutical circle loses its capacity to reform or reshape
technology in ways that attend to the disclosures offered by the work of feminists and people of
colour. He prevents his theology from becoming as Alfredo Fierro discerned early in liberation
theology's history, a "critical reflection on the faith."

In ways which are discouraging considering
liberation theology's stated deep commitment to the liberation of the poor from structural and
systematic injustices, Gutiérrez, albeit from a lack of critical foresight, has imposed restrictions on
the type and places where liberation might evolve. His emphasis on the Vatican as previous
chapters have demonstrated returns the dimension of hierarchies while simultaneously asserting
individual advancements but shying away from community action or radical change from within
the structures of the Church. Statements on the structure of social injustices are in compliance
with an institution that is both resistant to democratizing impulses and openly misogynist in many
of its practices.

The importance of examining the multiple layers of domination in society for any emancipatory

---

3 Alfredo Fierro, The Militant Gospel: A Critical Introduction to Political Theologies
project has yet to find intellectual space in the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez who continues to
mystify liberation's construction by claiming the divine is the only source that has the power to set
society in perfect moral order. This claim, while theologically orthodox lacks clarity while
subverting the efforts of the historical project of liberation -- a project sustained by a social
analysis that defines the areas of oppression and possibilities for action.

The shift by Gustavo Gutiérrez who stands as liberation theology's most popular
representative, to adhere more closely to the demands of the magisterium, suggests his vision for
an emancipated society is not so much the invention of those of the "poor" but of Gutiérrez and
the institution itself. CEB participants were to be the agents of a new way of being that would
insinuate itself into the larger community. Instead CEBS became insular groups where dissension
and critique were foreclosed in order to preserve the cohesiveness of the community and their
capability to function within the institutional Church.  With CEB representing liberation theology
in its practice, it becomes clear by their failure to address oppression in their own ranks, how this
theology circumvents the type of self-reflexive critique required to expose the pernicious means of
oppression in the lives of all individuals hence maintaining dominating practices within their
(CEBS) own structures.

These undisclosed elements in liberation theology's methods sit in opposition to the principles
that lay the foundation of this theology that even in these postmodernist/postcolonial times
continue to be relevant. Liberation theology was established on the grounds of being germane to

---

4 John Burdick in Looking For God in Brazil develops this argument of cohesiveness at the
expense of a deeper analysis of race and gender and how these factors are integrated into the
production of the CEB itself.

5 Welch, p. 166.
those who had no access to institutional power by enabling them to assert their full rights as humans. The alliance necessitated a distancing by theologians, priests and religious from an institution rooted in exclusive practices to allow for an opening of religious construction that would find value in the everyday lives of those disenfranchised by state and religious powers. For liberation theologians, the distance allowed them to insert a new component in the development of their theologies in the form of the social sciences through which they were intent on amassing new interpretations on how oppression imposed itself on the lives of people with whom they had committed themselves to serve. They did so when political events called for expansive statements that divided society sharply along lines of class. While this beginning appeared bold and, with the rise in popular mobilization, ready to deal oppression a formidable blow, liberation theology as it was practised in CEBS, could never distinguish itself from universalist and elitist practices that doused serious internal debate and diversity. As much as the hope might have been to avoid what Freire labelled the banking system of education -- the process of liberation in CEBS fell directly into a version of this in the drive to be a connected community within the boundaries of the institution. In this capacity and with the demands of authority from institutional sources, domination and its production in the everyday lives of Latin Americans remained largely unexamined. Since materials for use in CEB discussions were generated in great part from institutional sources and with Gutiérrez's own distancing from the social sciences as a discipline through which oppression could be better analyzed, the hope that mainstream liberation theology

---

6 The idea of liberation theologians following behind their communities of believers is prevalent throughout their work. Leonardo Boff for instance uses the metaphor of the shepherd following his flock. And yet here in this claim, Alistair Kee has critiqued liberation theology saying that in the end, "it has failed the very people to whom it is committed." Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology (London: SCM Press, 1990), p. 266.
would be more daring in its endeavours to reveal the workings of destructive forms of power has been severely curtailed. In lieu of a rigorous theory and practice, Gutiérrez opted for a spiritual conversion deemed as a forerunner to emancipative activities. In this equation, he overlooks how knowledge of domination and the empowerment process emerges from a dialectical engagement with the world predicated on the necessity of accessing ideas, interpretations and critique to discern the invisible ways in which domination is perpetuated. His work, in order to reclaim its capacity to function as an emancipatory impetus of integrity, would benefit from what Sharon Welch coined "an ethic of accountability" that examines "the costs of our attempts to do good. They also call us to an ethic of risk, realizing that victories are always partial, their value resident in the matrix of possibilities created."

Renato Rosaldo writes that doing anthropology is similar to frequenting garage sales where nothing appears to draw the items into some unified fashion particularly in these postcolonial times. Cultures, as Rosaldo insists, are not hermetically sealed units that can be exorcised from other influences for study or analysis. Rather, cultures, to be revealed in all their complexity, must be viewed as spaces in which boundaries and pressures are continually pushed, tugged and crossed. Neither individuals nor groups are discernible without acknowledging how "fluid" and

---

7 Gutiérrez's We Drink From Our Own Wells, The Truth Shall Make You Free and On Job are the predominant examples of this shift from engagement with the world to spiritual enrichment in one's private life.

8 Welch, p. 47.

yet "saturated with power" each is. The image of a garage sale is an apt one in reference to the work of Gutiérrez, who in contrast treats society as though, again in the words of Rosaldo, it were a "museum" through which he pronounces its identifying features as though it were both static and sacred removed from the intrigues of human complexity. While Gutiérrez, particularly in the 1970s sought to encourage the transformation of society, he did so with an image that cohered to his particular vision of what constitutes an emancipated Christian society (at one time envisioned in socialist terms). In later years, this vision was altered by a detachment from the social context to stress primarily a type of spirituality mostly devoid of social reality. In *We Drink From Our Own Wells*, Gutiérrez places death from assassination, poverty and suffering in the context of a spirituality that allows it to skirt issues of political responsibility and profound grief. He says, from those deaths, "Joy springs...from the hope that death is not the final word of history." This statement is consistent with the tenor of work Gutiérrez now does that glosses over the real and prevalent trials in peoples lives implying that those suffering from systematic poverty can and should focus on the joy that even suffering can bring. Hinged to this problem is Gutiérrez's use of subject positions. He writes using "we" referring to himself and whoever else might be engaged in the same field or from a similar class of education and "the poor" or sometimes "nonpersons." Clearly he has not deconstructed the subject/other dichotomy that plays an important role in the continuation of asymmetrical relations. He has yet to deconstruct the position of authority his voice takes on in an equation of this sort or account for the diversity

---

10 Rosaldo, p. 45.

among those who live in poverty. This is particularly clear in *We Drink From Our Wells*.

In present times, liberation theology maintains its contradictions and displacements in theory and praxis that seem less one of evolution as Gutiérrez would suggest, than a confession that theologians are at a loss of how to oppose the weight of the institutional Church without risking liberation theology's complete erosion. Or, their confusion on how to deal with a political and social climate now dispersed because of democracy and postmodern critique. To his theology's detriment, its stagnancy in the field of analysis and relevance, is in part the result of an apparent compromise made by Gutiérrez who chose not to deepen critique in his own midst while resisting questions surrounding the practices and doctrine of the Church.

Beyond the omission of incorporating a diversity of ideas and programs, Gutiérrez neglected to open his own methodology to the medley of theoretical opportunities offered by feminists and others exploring the implications of class, race and gender in all dimensions of human interaction. Instead, the method and the theology have remained constrained by the traditional hierarchical allocations of morality and knowledge sources. In practical terms the enclosure of the Church on CEB development suggests not the emergence of radically new insights on social conditions but culturally generated judgements coherent with the failure to use critique effectively internally.\(^\text{12}\)

With a Church authority no longer believing that humanity can realize a moral world, its prerogative appears to be one of instilling obedience to its word. For practising Christians the force of such authority and the degree of its influence alters the extent to which individuals may

\(^{12}\text{I am referring to John Burdick's insights that CEBs excluded those who were amongst the poorest of the community, those whose literacy level failed to meet the standards of the core group, women unable to attend three meetings a week, and those whose skin colour was darker than most. Looking for God in Brazil.}\)
claim for themselves freedom of thought and action in the "name of the greater good." The ends determined by a higher authority justify the sacrifice of the right of individuals to set their own ethical course.

CEBS in general appear not to have nurtured diversity. For the sake of internal acceptance or for a kind of benign demand for obedience, individuals were required to reserve the type of contestation that would engender questions that might undermine the validity of liberation theology's methods or singular emancipatory thought. The ethicist James Nelson suggests that in groups, members are often expected to suspend their individual freedoms of thought and action to gain not only admittance but to preserve the well being and higher goals of the group itself; "individuals must prove their worthiness for membership, and once admitted they must maintain that membership through appropriate religious experiences and righteous behaviour." Entrance and acceptance from within is dependent to a large degree on the extent to which the contractual limits of the group or institution are accepted and conformed to by the individual.

Most participants in the CEB nominally embrace the discourse but interpret it according to the model of charity which, while stimulating some to enter social movements, renders their political commitment dependent upon activist Church leaders. Even among committed activists, the Catholic value of conciliation has fostered emotional and social tensions with the confrontational world of party and labor politics.

This tendency toward homogeneity of thought and practice is not unexpected considering the universal tone of liberation theology's content, its pleas to a new way of being human, or in fact to the Church's own tendency to set the limits of human conduct. As Ada María Isasi-Díaz says

---


14 *Moral Nexus* p. 142

15 Burdick, p. 225.
such constraints narrow emancipatory potential rather than broadening it. Moral directives held to be infallible work to diminish people's value insinuating they lack the capacity to calculate the parameters of their own moral lives. Individuals are not encouraged to examine in detail power's subtle interactions in life itself that elicit conflicting moral responses, the extensive possibilities for correcting injustices, or, indeed the implications of certain forms of political action that are more welfarist in nature reconfirming the status of the objectified other. Obedience rather than a critically thinking form of accountability is given greater priority.

Issues like birth control and abortion are two of the most visible ways in which the Church and, in their turn, liberation theologians have avoided heeding to the failure of universals to account for the denigration of decisions and lives of women in particular who are caught in often nebulous moral conflicts that pivot from the harshness of their social and economic lives. Whereas the hierarchy "vest[s] their opinion with the same authority as the word of God. This amplification of infallibility leaves no room for dissent regarding noninfallible matters...." Liberation theologians have effectively elided a critique of their own subject positioning by working from within the parameters of institutional hierarchies and their basic principles. Perhaps because of their intellectual and physical connection to the institution, how race and gender affect the lives of individuals differently is never given adequate attention in their work, evading the more cumbersome questions of theologians own complicity in the production of domination. There is little to indicate that liberation theologians have expanded their ideas on gender aside

---


17 Isasi-Díaz, p. 144.
from traditional denunciations against spousal abuse and the right of women to speak and work on equal terms with men. Liberation theology, in its current links with the institutional Church, is not practising democracy and has yet to open its theoretical and methodological courses to the work of feminist theologians who in part contest the sovereignty of a male defined deity and the creation of a kingdom that leave entrenched ideas of hierarchy. Perhaps in the beginning the universals were like placards to summon others into action. Ideas like "justice for all" functioned to cue people to the particular injustices in their lives as well as their right if not responsibility to demand a life of opportunity not disparity. The shift to a more reserved approach admits the failure of this revolution on some level while allowing theologians to return to a theology without such blatant transformative desires for the world that demand more politically engaged responses. Were theologians weary of the wars and the lack of dramatic change aside from individual or small community transformations? Are welfarist programs more simply administered and organized with less intellectual and institutional opposition? Ironically, democracy in some ways allowed theologians like Gutiérrez their retreat in a way that military governments and their abuse of human rights could not. Repressive regimes forced a response from some sectors within the Church, most notably liberation theologians while democracy has a tendency to complicate the political arena.18

Confronting the details of oppression found in the occurrences of everyday life or those features that lack visibility are obstacles in a rhetoric dependent on a heroic venture of change. Women's lives and the oppressions they confront as they carry out their daily responsibilities obscure the clarity of broader calls for change. Revolutionary parlance tends to the dramatic

18 Burdick, p. 221.
("revolucion o muerte"/ "revolution or death" as an example) in its denunciations of injustice. It captures the spirit of righteousness in its universal appeal but is found wanting when faced with the rigour of analysis and critique that arise from the mundane examination of everyday life that reveal more about the insidious nature of oppression than romantic narratives. Large categories of analysis suggest large actions that are unsustainable in times of more dispersed political contestation.

The alternative route of incorporating the analyses of feminists and people of colour might have prevented liberation theology from stagnating on its course of political and social liberation. As Kee pointed out by attending to the visible and invisible features of domination, by ensuring liberation theology's independence in matters of analysis, and by asserting the right to rid all quarters of harmful forms of domination, the liberation theology of Gutiérrez would perhaps still have valuable contributions to make not only in theology but in the lives of the people whom this theology sought to serve.19

Gutiérrez's work requires a more critical approach to the Church and to the mechanisms that limit women's lives to mere survival. His theology needs not simply to give pithy recognition to these elements but to incorporate them into how the theology itself is developed so that it too becomes liberated from strains of domination. A more liberative process would incorporate the diversity of voices that make up the category of "the poor" while concurrently revealing how gender and race are imposed on the lives of all. The process would acknowledge that liberation itself is never fully achieved without the continual disclosure of all forms of oppression. As Laclau and Mouffe contend there is no one political subject as Gustavo Gutiérrez seemed to

19 Kee, p. 266.
imagine the poor. Rather, there are a plurality of subjects who, in this process, are charged with dissecting the political front on which they engage, deciding how their emancipatory projects will advance while attuning themselves to the specifics of their own lives allowing for interpretation and re-interpretation of conditions.

In the new situation, there is no privileged political subject...but a plurality of collective actors each struggling within their own spheres.... Politically the main problem is to explore the process through which each actor or social movement articulates a position or identity for itself; also, and in the long run, perhaps the possibility of building a counter-hegemonic formation through the articulation of movements. 20

Gutiérrez seems to have not only lost sight of the unique pressures of individual lives like that of women but how his (and others in similar positions) own position as a male representative of authority might hinder women's emancipatory potential in CEBS. The founding principle that individuals could and should be emancipated from social, economic and political injustices and that such possibilities could occur from within Christian based collectives has become more and more submerged under a theology that intones a personal conversion in religious matters not in matters that affect the actual lived conditions of people's lives.

Liberation theologians were the crucial link between the institution and the people and while the commitment to their communities of faith was undoubtedly sincere, such commitment is much altered in the work of Gutiérrez who through aligning himself with the knowledge bases of the Vatican demonstrates how hierarchically directed that commitment is today in actual practice. His commitment perhaps has lacked sufficient autonomy from the institution and its own cultural prejudices to represent adequately the interests of those who suffer from oppressions beyond the

areas of interest or knowledge of theologians.

The Church, in its thrust to bring liberation theology under its authority, in fact never permitted much of its power to be distributed among the people of the region. Instead, it sought to recover what power and influence it had lost by applying undue pressure on dioceses, on liberation theologians themselves and by exchanging liberal thinking priests for conservative ones. Through this process, CEBS themselves also became increasingly more conservative and less politically active aside from community actions more of a charitable nature than those aimed at altering the causes of imbalances. In the example of CEBS in John Burdick's study he found,

[the] *comunidade* has thus reinforced a process of elitization, shoring up the institutional Church's rootedness in a stabler, better-off, and more literate segment of the local working class, as well as pushing an increasing number of the less stable or well-off segments onto the margins of Church life...the new Catholic Church does not encourage the creation of spaces in which women might speak of their domestic turmoil without fear of gossip or without reinforcing their own feelings of guilt. Liberationist priests retreat from the domestic arena, fearing 'alienation,' and in the process alienate women who seek an outlet for their grievances.  

The end result saw that where the institution appeared strongest and most able to assert its power and therefore control over the activities of CEB members are the locations where CEBS generally fell into line with the demands of the institution leaving obscured the lives of women and people of colour.

Under these circumstances with far too few mentors or leaders to suggest other possible directions there is little surprise that women in CEBS have not been able to engage in a feminist analysis of their own oppression. Too often the message has been one of duty to family and community, to the liberation of the entire community with little attention to the inherent

\[21\] Burdick, p. 224.
theoretical and practical flaw in such an enterprise that evades the substantive oppression of another. The call was to work for the common good designed by elites not fully familiar with the machinations of oppression in the lives of other subject positions.

Hermeneutical interpretations on biblical sources in the work of Gutiérrez are neither fully innovative nor critical enough to accomplish the goal of emancipation among liberationists nor within the theology itself. In these more conservative times Gutiérrez has returned to the production of a theology with little evidence of political commitment to social action on the part of the Church.

The question is whether the "liberation" in liberation theology continues to hold any efficacious impetus for social and political resistance, or has it come to represent, as other theologies have, an apoliticized form of personal conversion. At one time liberation implied a responsibility to act against domination not simply as individuals but as communities of people intent on structural change. It implied an accumulation of more profound and critical knowledge on the world in which they lived. It suggested that to be a committed Christian one was obliged to act on the world and to believe in the historical transformation of social conditions. Liberation did not signify, at least in theory, the exclusion of those who chose to press analysis further as some feminist and women CEB participants have attempted only to find themselves marginalized and without the resources to continue.

The problem is not entirely contained to the shift in the meaning of liberation, but rests with the disavowal of liberation theology's roots that were linked out of a moral sense of responsibility to political and social transformation. This commitment held within it an integrity that permitted people to make sacrifices for one another cognizant that resistance demanded a consistency in
belief and praxis. With the positioning of praxis distant from the core of theological development and with political action considered the responsibility of the secular realm, that integrity is compromised.

If, as Thomas Bruneau has said, "The goal of the church is to influence men [sic] and society, or, more specifically, to lead men and, by implication, society, to salvation" then liberation theologians must understand the shape of this salvation for society and how the Church as a distinctly androcentric institution mandates its leadership to influence mores and roles to merge with its particular vision of society. Finally, liberation theologians like Gutiérrez whose work is extensively read and held as the centrepiece of all liberation theology, must clarify their participation in the manufacturing of identities and belief systems that work against those who are being served. Questions of homogeneity and the suppression of identity must be examined to understand if such efforts in the end serve an already present status quo. Unfortunately to date, Gustavo Gutiérrez has not developed the key questions in his own work that would articulate the implications of authority on the identities and freedoms of women who are or might seek their emancipation.

Liberation theology's growth under Gutiérrez's pen did not lead it to become more flexible, more critical, more capable to adapt to new analysis and areas of analysis. Work on CEBS indicate that the internal critique supposedly held as the shield against liberation theology's demise never became a fundamental element in CEB methodology allowing for the rise in intolerance among CEB participants and dependence on liberatory rhetoric. In some cases, CEBS are centres

of inflexibility maintained by a core group of people and more recently by the institution itself. This form of rigidity bordering on intolerance of class, race and gender, forecloses on the growth of ideas and analysis which may in fact have guaranteed CEB longevity within the institution. For those who wish to explore oppression or domination in more specific terms relating to their lives or to the institutions that impose themselves on their lives, they must do so without the aid and material support of the founding proponents of liberation theology or from the institutional Church. 

Freedom within CEBS in relation to the degree of critical thinking and the development of theological ideas and political responses has narrowed to take on the appearance of a social justice committee rather than a more autonomous and far reaching goal oriented community that was suggested in the earlier writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez.

In examining the role of leadership and its importance in sustaining groups and movements as well as in advancing new ideas and methods that depose those critical but damaging hierarchical practices it becomes clear that Gutiérrez's own articulation of oppression and liberation were too broad to account for the oppressions that limit the lives of women. Discussions on liberation's form were linked to the securing of justice but rarely to freedom or to any of the other invisible components of oppression that would allow for a less sparsely defined notion of liberation that because of its current connections to a deity for ultimate salvation eludes political direction. The eschatological imperative releases theologians from the responsibility to deal with the political and cultural configurations of an emancipated society in depth. The justification lies in the assertion

[23] Burdick, p. 222.

[24] Chapters two and four dealt extensively with how Gutiérrez's notion of liberation was rooted in not simply broadly defined notions of liberation but in rhetoric of universal implications but predicated in essence on the "universal man."
that a liberated world is unknowable to them just as the divine essence and expectations for the future are also unknowable.

"The Church" as James Nelson writes, "not only transmits or witnesses to a style of ethics, but also its very existence as a community gives contour and configuration to its ethics."25 While Nelson's intent may be to present the positive components of Church experience his comment begs an answer to the question of diversity, judgement and autonomy as moral agents within institutions. How can institutions, particularly those stridently embedded in the maintenance of hierarchies, be made accountable for the harm levelled on the lives of individuals who suffer under the dictates of moral judgement or determinism? Can a community from within the institution adequately counter the pressures of conformity? Rather than opening opportunity for people to think and act on their lives independently, the institution with its influence through culture by way of priests, theologians, religious and others holding degrees of influence, strives to restrict individuals to the models and roles it determines as essential to the building of a just society.

Liberation theologians like Gutiérrez neglected, as Gloria Anzaldúa and Ruth Behar might say, to cross the borders of the institution, of privilege, of gender, of race and of knowledge itself to reflect more deeply on the worlds of others.26 The future Gutiérrez has more recently offered is a fragmented liberation linked to a hierarchy of power that is ultimately unknowable and ahistorical (God mediated through the institution). Rather than allowing himself to be

25 Nelson, p. 35.

transformed by new knowledge bases, Gutiérrez opted for a theoretical standpoint dependent on "timeless principles" disentangled from the intricacies of political and social thought and reality.27 His stress on an all powerful but unknowable god empties his theology of its political responsibility to act on injustice from within religious quarters. This opens the way for the positioning of Church and Church doctrine to exist outside of human interrogation. The consequence is a devalidation of the work and stresses of those struggling to survive and articulate their oppressions. The implications are a re-entrenchment of customary interpreters of knowledge but with an added emphasis on the supremacy of Vatican theological/moral declarations. "The question, then, is whether the institutional church exists to help the person attain her end, or whether the end of the person is secondary to the end of the church."28

As some feminist theologians have demonstrated not only in their writings but in their commitment to communities, other alternatives might have been chosen by Gutiérrez to ensure the integrity of the emancipatory project while continuing to assert the importance of preserving the project's currency with changing political and social pressures. In this vein, feminist theologians have been more adept at maintaining the integrity of critique and praxis of liberation theology under the demands of democracy and pressures from the institution than their male counterparts. Their theologies offer more emancipatory potential, the consequence of their heed to variant strains of oppression that affect the lives of women differently than men; and through their capacity to challenge the authority the institutional Church holds over knowledge without


28 Isasi-Díaz, p. 149.
dismissing the importance of collective social action against these very injustices but in ways that are appropriate for the present political climate. Instead of ordering the lives of Latin Americans around large emancipatory platitudes, feminist theologians like Isasi-Diaz have found it necessary to understand the chaos or messiness of living that elude neat conceptual categories and solutions.

The production of domination needs to be understood within this conclave of complex living to illuminate how lives are constructed. The solutions are wide and varied and require intense critical contemplation with programs that match such reflections. In all these programs critical consciousness must be accompanied by an understanding of the force of popular beliefs and practices that are not necessarily institutionally generated but key to the cultural identities of communities. The projects necessitate a dual emphasis that sees one pressuring the institutional Church to admit and act on its complicity in the production of oppression, while also continuing to forge critical knowledges and programs at local and national levels in the secular sphere.

Theologians like Isasi-Diaz seek not to establish normative moral constraints or rules or even theological truths to stand for all women but rather to examine how women, as they become increasingly conscious of how power has been used against them, create new more liberating belief systems and values by which to live. This is neither an ethic of individualism nor relativism. Instead what occurs is the construction of lives in the process of critically assessing the structure of community values and political impetuses as a way of situating a link between one's own thrust toward a form of liberation and the gaining of justice for one's community. It is a process toward liberation that recognizes the specificity of constraints.

...the individual is defined only by his [sic] relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others. He justifies his existence by a movement which, like freedom, springs from his heart but which leads outside of him....This individualism does
not lead to the anarchy of personal whim. Man is free; but he finds his law in his freedom.  

By moving beyond the institution, not entirely from choice but through the inability to construct their theologies freely, some feminist theologians (those not so intimately linked to mainstream liberation theologians) have produced theologies of challenge. Ones that place knowledge itself under a microscopic examination that calls for continual re-interpretation as new knowledges arise forcing changes that recognize how oppression is played out in daily encounters. They suggest the time has arrived to replace the vision of one unique ahistorical liberation with an emancipatory project composed of multiple subject positions and actors each responsible for integrating and building on the insights of others. The finality of the project lies only in the finality of the lives of individuals who continue to open for others new political and social possibilities.

---

29 Simone de Beauvoir, p. 156.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Bose, Christine E. and Edna Acosta-Belen eds. Women in the Latin American Development


---- "Nationalism, Feminism, and Revolution in Central America." in *Feminist Nationalism*, ed.


Goizueta, Roberto S. We Are A People!: Initiatives in Hispanic American Theology. Minneapolis:


---- "Notes for a Theology of Liberation," Theological Studies (31) 2, June 1970.


---- "The Task of Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology -- Mujeristas: Who We Are and What We Are About." in *Feminist Theology from the Third World A Reader.* Maryknoll: Orbis Books,


---- *Sexism and Godtalk: Toward a Feminist Theology.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1985


Romero, Oscar Arnulfo. *Si me matan resucitare en el Pueblo salvadoreno.* CELADE. 1980 No other data provided.


----"Life as the Maid's Daughter." in *Challenging Fronteras* pp. 195-214.


Rosaldo-Nunes, María José F. "Women's Voices in Latin American Theology." in *The Power of


Tristán, Flora: Centro de la mujer peruana. **Mujeres Latino americanas: Diez Ensayos y una Historia Colectiva.** Lima: Flora Tristán, Centro de la Mujer Peruana, 1988


