Rethinking *Theology in Revolution*:
A Critical Retrieval of Sergio Arce’s Theological Work, its Legacy and Relevance for Re-articulating Liberation Theologies in Cuba, Latin America, and the Caribbean

by

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Abstract

This dissertation provides a critical retrieval of Sergio Arce’s theological legacy, and proposes it as a source of inspiration to continue renewing liberation theologies in Cuba and in Latin America. It presents a panoramic view of the historical contexts previous to Arce’s articulation of his theology and also reconstructs the various stages of the development of his theology by reviewing his major writings from the early 1960s to the late 1990s. Bringing him into a conversation with other recognized Latin American liberation theologians, this thesis presents a reconstruction of his major theological insights related to discourses and practices of liberation, highlighting important similarities and also differences between their approaches. In light of current social contexts in Cuba and abroad, and the irruption of new voices, and drawing on decolonial perspective this dissertation examines the relevance of his theological legacy, identifying significant contributions and also key limitations to be considered for renewing theology in Cuba today.
To the memory of my parents, Miriam and Ary
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Introduction

As part of a larger complex set of sociopolitical, economic, and ideological geopolitical global shifts, the triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1959 was one of the most significant and influential socio-political events in the world, as it happened in 1959 and in its influence in the succeeding decades of the twentieth century. Because of the characteristics of its “revolution,” Cuba quickly became, and over the years has continued to be, a source of inspiration for many liberation movements and revolutionary forces around the world. It also became a cause of contention (during the Cold War) between the powerful forces of “Capitalism” and “Communism” represented by the interests of the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

Since its triumph, the Cuban revolution has become a long lasting, complex, conflictive, and contradictory process of socio-economic, political, and cultural transformations with deep repercussions for the Cuban people, the neighboring countries, and beyond. Despite the multiple, opposing internal and external forces the Cuban revolutionary process has shown great resilience and adaptability, particularly during the last two decades. More recently, a new set of controversial economic reforms seeking to “update” the Cuban economic system, and more

\[^{1}\text{What is commonly known as the “Cuban revolution” has historically been a much more complex process than suggested by this simplifying tag. Since its gestation, multiple interrelated internal and external factors, political forces and social actors, conflicting ideological tendencies and interests, have contributed to shape this complex sociohistorical process. Nonetheless, some “features” of the revolutionary process have helped significantly to amplify its symbolism, inspiring progressive and revolutionary forces around the world: e.g., its massive support by the population, particularly in the first stages of the process, who saw in the triumph of the rebel forces against a dictatorial regime that was backed by the U.S. economic and political interest groups, an opportunity to reconfigure the society more democratically in terms of social equity and justice. Another inspiring feature is what many interpret as the resilient character embodied by the project, expressed in the Cuban people’s resistance to and defiance of U.S. policies and actions against the revolutionary process, its leaders, and also the Cuban population despite its geographical nearness and disproportional economic and military power relation between both countries.}\]

\[^{2}\text{As Eric Selbin argues, the “Cuban revolution” has been in varying degrees at the core of ground breaking phenomena such as the “Cold War”; the anti-imperial, and liberation struggles in South and Central America, the Caribbean, the Near and Middle East, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia; the European and North American student movement protests in 1968; and the more recent worldwide anti-globalization movements upsurge. Eric Selbin, “Conjugating the Cuban Revolution: It Mattered, It Matters, It Will Matter,” in Latin American Perspectives, Issue 164, vol. 36 no. 1 (January 2009): 21-22.}\]
importantly to avoid the definitive collapse of the “revolution,” has gradually been put in place.\textsuperscript{3}

For many, these reforms are a clear sign that the “revolution”–or the “regime”–as some prefer to call it–signal the end, or at least the transition toward something very different from what it has been in the past. For many reasons, many consider that Cuba is at a crucial crossroads in history once again.\textsuperscript{4} It should not come as a surprise that heated debates about the continuity of the revolutionary process and its legacy, and Cuba’s likely future scenarios are increasingly taking place inside and outside of the island.\textsuperscript{5}

For many Christians in Cuba, including myself, it is important to engage in discussions about present and future with appreciation for the “advances” made and, in some measures, still maintained by the revolutionary process, especially when measured against the extreme poverty of many other countries in the Caribbean, Latin America, and around the world. As a pastor and as a theologian, and as an “heir” of the Cuban revolution as it triumphed in the imaginations of most Cubans after 1959 and, under enormous pressures, was institutionalized–incompletely and imperfectly–in subsequent decades (1960s–1980s), and being aware of both its successes but also its limitations and failures, my main concern is how to contribute to the current debates on alternative “socialist” paths of social development and Cubans’ life improvement in the face of many complex historical events and unexpected challenges. At the moment of writing this introduction, the announcement of the agreement between US and Cuban governments to

\textsuperscript{3}Michael Reid, “Revolution in Retreat,” in The Economist, Special Report on Cuba, March 24\textsuperscript{th} 2012, 3-12. While relatively slow and limited, these reforms seek to re-energize the unproductive and inefficient economy by promoting the participation of non-state actors (private sector and co-operatives) mainly in the area of services. It is expected that by 2015 about a third of the country’s workforce will be facing unemployment due to a massive termination of jobs in the public sector. See Editors, “On the Road to capitalism,” in The Economist, March 24 (2012): 13.

\textsuperscript{4}Michael Reid, “Revolution in Retreat.”

reestablish diplomatic relations between both countries, after more than fifty years of animosity and strong confrontations between their leaders and important sectors of both populations, came as a great surprise. The announcement was positively received for many governments and people around the world. Of course, a thorough analysis, even a depiction, of these historical conflicting relations goes well-beyond the goal of this dissertation. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this thesis, it is sufficient to say that the real scope of the measures announced by presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro, and their effects, especially for Americans, Cuban Americans, and Cubans, remain to be seen. In this sense, it is my hope that this dissertation becomes more relevant now than ever before.

Key points in the discussions within churches today also concern their current and future roles at this time of social transformations. And this issue includes theological reflections on their mission in light of the myriad challenges and future implications of the current processes of widespread changes, indeed historic transition.  

The guiding question at this present juncture is: how a renewed theology, starting from the current Cuban context, in the midst of great transitions in Cuba and the world, and drawing on specifically Cuban experiences and traditions, can help churches (and other faith communities) to address the challenges and discern the possibilities to construct alternative paths in the best interests for all—and especially for the historically poor and marginalized? As many

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Cubans imagine answers to the multiple issues this question evokes, I propose that a central point of reference is the work of Sergio Arce and his *theology in Revolution*.

From a Protestant vantage point, Arce’s theological articulation has been the most significant, systematic, and original attempt at interpreting the Cuban revolutionary context. For over fifty years he has been very influential in the process of forging a revolutionary theological perspective and re-orienting the mission of many churches, specially the Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Cuba (IPRC), as social actors in that process.

Since my incorporation to the Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Cuba in the early 1990s, after many years of Marxist-Leninist atheist formation in my adolescence and youth, I found in Arce’s theological thought one of the main spiritual sources of inspiration and theological influence for my initial formation as a Christian and, few years later, as a pastor, during a complex and confusing period of the Cuba’s history. Arce’s theological work helped me to understand Christian faith” in non-spiritualistic and “this worldly” ways. His theology showed me creative ways of interpreting the Bible and Christian doctrines in light of past contexts and present realities we lived and were living as Cubans. It also encouraged me to practice my Christian faith in connection to the social situation at the time, and to participate, along with others, in seeking ways of fulfilling our mission and witness as Christians in those circumstances.

My thesis is that Arce’s dynamic, radical, and groundbreaking theological vision of the “revolution” and impact on transforming the mission of the church in Cuba deserves serious consideration for understanding the past and the parameters of debate today as Cubans face new waves of historical transitions. Accordingly, in this dissertation I engage in a process of critical retrieval of his numerous theological insights and propose his legacy today as a source of
inspiration to continue renewing liberation theologies in Cuba and in Latin America. I will do this in three main interconnected points.

First, I will provide a reconstruction of Arce’s perspective and framework, along the way highlighting similarities and differences with other Latin American liberation theologians. I argue that Arce's theology can be understood as part of a much broader liberationist current across Latin America and around the world in these decades. Still, his theology is also very unique. I will specify and highlight the distinctiveness of his theological work, as I bring him into a conversation with other liberation theologians, mainly Hugo Assmann, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and José Míguez Bonino. I do not intend to do an exhaustive comparison between Arce and these theologians, which, among other things, would have to take into account the different contexts and trajectories of resistance/transformation in each case and changes over time. Rather, my aim is to introduce Arce’s work in a way that the scope of his thought, its unique features and his singular contributions in the re-framing of theology, mission and ethics in the post-1959 Cuban church can be better appreciated.

Second, I reinterpret Arce’s theology using a decolonial interpretive framework. Drawing on decolonial theorists associated to the project critical of modernity/coloniality, who critically rethink past and current multiple interconnected ways of domination which configured and continue to shape the complex colonizing power matrix; and also critically recover practices of social liberation, cultural resistance, and epistemological disobedience, I will identify some of

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8 A fuller study of specific debates in which Sergio Arce was involved, the views of other theologians and pastors, and in some cases their criticisms of his thinking, requires examining each context in greater detail, which is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

9 Although I am conscious of the multiple expressions of liberation theologies all over the world, when speaking of liberation theologians in this dissertation, I will be referring to the Latin American liberation theologians unless otherwise indicated.
the crucial contributions of Arce’s work as well as important limitations. This point will help me
demonstrate the fruitfulness of the decolonial perspective for theology today.

Third, the goal of this dissertation is not primarily historical, focusing on the debates and
criticisms of the past. Rather, my objective is to examine Arce’s legacy in addressing the
questions of today, the contributions and limitations of his, in my judgment, still influential
perspective in confronting the profound transitions faced by the church and the Cuban society as
a whole.

Now, Arce is not an entirely obscure figure; his contributions have been recognized by
theologians such as José Míguez Bonino, Leonardo Boff, Dorothee Söelle, Jürgen
Moltmann, and James Cone. Nevertheless, his contributions have been largely neglected by
many other liberationist theologians and commentators on the church in Latin America. My
claim is that Arce’s pioneering and controversial interpretations of the liberating/salvific

11In his study on the Trinity, Leonardo Boff refers to the interpretation of the Cuban revolutionary process from a
trinitarian perspective that Arce articulated in 1969 in his Hacia una teología de la liberación as one of the first
contextual theological elaborations about this doctrine in Latin America. See Leonardo Boff, Trinity and Society, trans.
13Reflecting on the significance of Jesus Christ as the Father’s Son and humanity’s Older Brother, Moltmann
recognizes the important Christological contribution of 1977 Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian-Reformed
Church in Cuba, in whose elaboration Arce played a very significant role. According to Moltmann, “esta iglesia
proclama que Jesucristo es el hijo de Dios humanado y nuestro hermano resucitado. Confiesa así en la Cuba
socialista que el amor sacrificial y solidario es una ‘necesidad’ divina y humana al mismo tiempo.”See Jürgen
14In his account of the process of dialogue between US black liberation theologians and Latin American liberation
theologians, James Cone highlights Arce’s participation in the theological meetings that took place at the
Comunidad Teológica de México in 1977 and at the Seminario Evangélico de Teología in Matanzas in 1979, and his
openness to black liberation theologians’ contributions. Cone views in Arce’s attitude an important factor in the
gradual process of dialogue and mutual learning between Latin American liberation theologians and African
American liberation theologians. See James H. Cone, “From Geneva to Sao Paulo: A Dialogue between Black
Theology and Latin American Liberation Theology,” en Sergio Torres y John Eagleson (eds.), The Challenge of
15It is worth noting that most Latin American liberation theologians and scholars have almost totally ignored the
Cuban theological context and production, despite recognizing the impact and inspiration of the Cuban Revolution
on the origin and later developments of Latin American liberation theologies. See John Kirk, “Reflections on Cuban
Liberation Theology,” 325. With some key exceptions, a glance at the voluminous production of Latin American
liberation theologies corroborates this lack of attention to Cuban theological reflections, which must be corrected.
character of the Cuban revolutionary process, the communal praxis of “work” as spiritual fulfillment and historical-eschatological destiny of humans, the prophetic character of Marxist atheism, and the idolatrous character of “capitalism,” made his “theology in Revolution” a significant creative moment of Latin American liberationist theological reflection!

It is worth noting that at the heart of Arce’s theological reflections was the insistence that “the revolution” was centrally significant as a matter of faith. Yet, the context of contemporary Cuba is very different than when Arce first wrote his theology. Today the situation is far more complex, and there is no single axis of struggle (like “socialism” vs. “capitalism”). Latin American and Cuban contexts have significantly changed since the period of Arce’s most influential writings. Other geo-political forces and socio-economic dynamics are in play now. The world has radically changed, new social movements have emerged, and liberationist thinking has evolved, making it possible to see more clearly key blind spots and gaps in frameworks of earlier generations. The changes taking place cut across the multiple interwoven dimensions of culture, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and, for the interests of this dissertation, religious-ecclesial affiliation. New social and theological subjects have been

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17 In Arce’s case, while recognizing the liberating and anti-neocolonial character of the Cuban revolutionary project, specifically its socio-political and economic aspects, he failed to recognize other forms of oppression and marginalization, e.g. patriarchy, racism, and homophobia, which were never eliminated but redeployed and reinforced in certain ways during the Revolution. He also failed to voice the struggles to make visible these dimensions of oppression and to promote ‘radical’ changes.
emerging since the 1970s, becoming increasingly more visible and raising serious questions about the state of affairs in the continent and in Cuba. A liberating revolutionary theology for today’s Cuba (and Latin America) must engage the plurality of “new” voices; it must account for the multiple ways in which the oppressed, marginalized, and discriminated in Cuban society (and Latin America) express their faith in God amidst suffering, scarcity, and exclusion. Cuba’s future scenarios inevitably involve addressing deepening capitalist globalization, both accommodating in some respects while also continuing to resist and to explore alternatives, strengthening ties in the ‘anti-globalization’/alter-globalization movements and forging other paths of development.

Theology today needs to address this horizon of conflicting possibilities. In particular, while the dominant political discourse in Cuba emphasizes class analyses, there is need for developing more comprehensive approaches that recognize the interconnected character of contemporary struggles over class, culture, gender, sex, race, and environment. Cuban liberationist and revolutionary theologies are challenged by the various forms in which power relations occur and are part of the complex network of social and political relations, and its global connections. In this regard I find a decolonial theoretical frame, reflecting the most recent Latin American efforts to synthesize insights from the main liberation struggles of recent decades, to build on Marxist and “dependency” perspectives among others which were so influential in the 1960s and 1970s, the most promising way to address the complex capitalist modern/colonial legacies in the continent, and how they connect to the task of theology.

However, Arce did his theological work in very particular circumstances of political struggle, social reconfiguration, and profound ideological tension inside and outside the Cuban church. To do justice to his theology it is important to keep in mind the following key aspects of his context. First, Arce’s theological work stems from a deeply pastoral concern for the church in
Cuba and its role to respond to the present historical situation and developments of “revolutionary” Cuba. As a result, his theological articulations, and writings often exhibit a sense of urgency. He addressed many concerns in a hurry with little time for more systematic study and argumentation.

Second, he drank from the categorical well available to him. His tendency to speak using unqualified terms (such as Revolution, Marxism, Capitalism, Socialism, and so on) in apparently inflexible binary terms reflects the ideological contexts of the times. Because of the profound historical changes that have taken place in the world and in Cuba over the years, and the evolving complexity of perspectives and debates on those changes, these categories and binaries no longer adequately convey all of the issues involved in such complex processes. Thus, in order to do justice to Arce’s contributions I preserve those categories and deploy them sometimes, but other times I use quotation marks to signal their complexity, and my interest in avoiding essentialist and dualist expressions.

And third, it is also important to acknowledge Arce’s intellectual “isolation” with respect to many theoretical debates, including theological ones outside Cuba. He had little access to the larger international theoretical and political debates on “Marxisms” (including Marxist-Leninisms), “the Left,” and multiple “ideologies.” In addition, the sentiment shared by many Cubans of being under a constant siege by “the enemy” played a significant role in his frequently explicit apologetic stand concerning the “Cuban revolution.” This sense of siege was also expressed in his reluctance to be openly critical to the revolutionary process. As a result, he often and somewhat “naïvely” appears to be “acritical,” and “unconditional” in his acceptance of the “revolution” and its leaders. He did not want his criticisms to be used as ammunition against the “revolution.” One cannot read Arce’s theology without taking these aspects into consideration.
To do otherwise may lead to superficial readings and misunderstandings of his enormous contributions to theology.

In order to address the main points outlined above, I organize this dissertation in five chapters. In chapter one, drawing on Cuban scholars who, like many in the churches today, are sympathetic to—and often critical of—the “Cuban revolution,” I sketch the major socioeconomic, political, and religious-Christian outlines and dynamics of the pre-revolutionary period and the first years of the Cuban revolution. My intention is not to comprehensively describe or analyze those important periods in Cuba’s history. Rather, my aim is to present a panoramic view of the historical and contexts in which Arce launched his theology.

In chapter two, I outline Sergio Arce’s religious formation and later theological training, paying attention the important intellectual and ideological influences. Reviewing his major writings from the early 1960s to the late 1990s, I will draw in broad strokes the various stages of the development of his theology, noting the broader, constantly evolving, socio-political, cultural, and theological contexts which shaped his thinking.

In chapter three, I flesh out the major themes in Arce’s work concerning debates about theological currents related to discourses and practices of liberation. Here I discus his articulation of the historical and sociopolitical-economic character of salvation and its expression in the Cuban revolutionary context. I also outline his interpretations of “work,” “capitalism,” the relationship between “faith” and “ideology,” and “Marxist atheism.” I also bring Arce into a conversation about these topics with other Latin American liberation theologians, namely Hugo Assmann, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and José Míguez Bonino, highlighting their similarities and differences. I note many similarities, and also show that his work was distinctive. I deal with
these theologians not with the goal of providing a comprehensive examination of their work. Rather, I use them as foils to highlight the distinctiveness of Arce’s theology.

In chapter four, again tracing some of the sympathetic yet critical scholars whose views are widely reflected in church discussions, I briefly chart current perspectives on Cuba and the world. I divide it in two sections. In the first section, I outline perspectives on the new socio-political configurations in the continent, and the emergence of new social, political, and religious movements in the continent and globally (e.g., World Social Forum). I briefly trace the irruptions of some “new” voices (women, indigenous, African descendants, LGBQT), especially in Cuba, raising their own questions, interests, and strategies for interpreting and transforming social reality. I also indicate the social, economic, and political strategies adopted by the Cuban government as responses to global challenges that are forcing the gradual and uneven re-insertion of Cuba within globalizing capitalist networks. In the second and shorter portion of this chapter, I point to the new voices, actors, and historical subjects who are raising new challenges, and provoking new discussions and debates in theology. In particular I will focus on the theoretical import of the recently emerged decolonial approaches for the reconfiguration of liberationist theological discourses. As mentioned earlier, these approaches serve as the general frame for this dissertation.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, and in drawing on the decolonial perspective, I argue for the continuing relevance of Sergio Arce’s theological legacy to the renewal of theology today. At the same time, I identify key limitations which must be recognized by younger generations of scholars in the task of renewing theology in Cuba today.

This dissertation will contribute to the development of the theological task, while primarily focusing on the Cuban context, and more particularly on one of its most influential
figures. To my knowledge, despite Arce’s significant contributions to the theological task, and to Cuban and liberation theologies more generally, a thoroughly critical reinterpretation and retrieval of his theological legacy in light of the multiple challenges of the current contexts of Cuba, Latin America, and beyond, has not been articulated. With this dissertation I seek to contribute to fill the gap in scholarship between study of the historical project of the Cuban revolution and the study of its intellectual theological configurations. While many liberation theologians and scholars recognize the impact and inspiration of the Cuban revolution in struggles of liberation in Latin America, in-depth analyses of the theological reflections as they emerged out of the church in the context of revolutionary Cuba, and most particularly the work of Sergio Arce, have been elaborated only very recently.¹⁸

Let me affirm that there is much more that can be gained from studying Arce’s theological journey and trajectory. This dissertation is a first attempt to examine and articulate his major contributions in the hope that in doing so contributes to enriching the debates taking place in Cuba, Latin America, and elsewhere.

¹⁸In the course of writing this dissertation the search for other commentaries on Arce’s theology revealed only a few, all written with different motivations, methods, and approaches from the one being developed here. For example, David Puig-Jordán, En memoria de las victimas: Hacia un estudio crítico de la teología política en Cuba desde el diálogo con la “Teología después de Auschwitz” de Johann B Metz (Berlín, Alemania: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Berlin, 2013), 185-219. Drawing on Metz’s political theology as a normative hermeneutical criterion, Puig-Jordán devotes a chapter to evaluate Arce’s theological interpretations without addressing the complex and shifting character of the local, regional, and global contexts from which Arce articulated his theological work during more than four decades, and neglecting his cross-fertilizing dialogue with other liberation theologians from Latin America and other parts of the world.
Chapter 1

Situating the Debates between Worlds:
Concerning the Socio-Economic, Political, and Ecclesial Contexts of Pre-Revolutionary Cuba and the First Years of the Revolution

Introduction

Engaging the work of Sergio Arce requires that one situates it within the historical, social, and political contexts of pre-revolutionary Cuba and the first five years after the triumph of the Cuban revolution within which his theological thought was first formulated and subsequently developed. My goal is not to provide an extensive or comprehensive analysis of this period in the Cuban context; it is rather to sketch the major outlines and dynamics of the period, drawing on the work of respected scholars who will help me reconstruct a panoramic view of this period. The goal is not to offer the definitive interpretation of these pivotal moments in the history of Cuba, but to set the stage for the drama that is reflected in the work of Arce.

Socio-Economic and Political Contexts of Pre-revolutionary Cuba

The first point in understanding the socio-economic, political, and cultural context of pre-Revolution Cuba is its strong economic and political dependence on the U.S. The neocolonial relationship between U.S. and Cuba started in 1898 with the U.S. military intervention in the Cuba’s war for independence from Spain, which marked decisively Cuban society until 1959, and still marks Cuban society.¹ As Louis A. Pérez points out, “economic relationships, social formation, political culture, and in the end, the very character of the state itself acquired definitive character under the conditions created by” U.S. imperialist dominion over Cuba.²

²Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, xvii.
After defeating Spain in 1898 and two years of costly military occupation with increasing domestic political pressure against it, the U.S. government decided to bring home its troops in 1902 and finally to recognize Cuba as an “independent” nation, but not without first establishing the terms of their relationship, by which the U.S. effectively exerted political and economic control over the island. Through the Platt Amendment (1901), designed by the Secretary of War Elihu Root and signed by Senator Orville H. Platt, the U.S. government guaranteed its imperial dominance over Cuba.\(^3\) Besides other provisions the Platt Amendment stated that, in transferring the control of Cuba to the Government established under the new constitution, 1) the United States “may exercise the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence, the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty;” 2) “the government of Cuba will sell or lease to the United States lands necessary for coaling or naval stations at certain specific points;” and 3) “the government of Cuba shall never enter into treaty with any foreign power or powers which will impair or tend to impair the independence of Cuba.”\(^4\) This amendment became “an adequate if imperfect substitute for annexation” of Cuba, a goal that some U.S. political sectors pursued over the course of the nineteenth century as a concrete expression of the “Manifest Destiny” and the Monroe Doctrine.\(^5\)

The U.S. government did not limit its control over Cuba to political-juridical aspects. The Platt Amendment also opened Cuba to the expansion of U.S. capital. Throughout the military occupation and the first years of the republic, investments by U.S. corporations in Cuba increased dramatically, especially in sugar production, which was the principal economic activity

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in the island. U.S. companies purchased extensive lands and controlled, along with other foreign companies, important economic sectors such as mining, the railroad system, utility concessions (gas, electric power, and telephone services), and banking. In addition, the various “reciprocity” treaties and other economic treaties established between several U.S. administrations and Cuban governments over the years played as important a role as the Platt Amendment in maintaining Cuba’s subjection to U.S. economic and political interests. “These treaties cumulatively cemented Cuba’s role as a sugar export economy to the U.S. market and as an importer of U.S. manufactured goods.”

Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, U.S. investors restored the sugar industry, which had been almost destroyed in the war of 1895. This exacted a huge and long-lasting cost on Cuba: excessive dependence on sugar exports as the sole base of the economy and the perpetuation of “latifundia” forced small cane planters to depend completely on mostly foreign owned mills. One significant consequence of this process of concentration of capital and land ownership was the arresting of growth among the rural middle class and the increasing precariousness of the underemployed agrarian proletariat.

The sporadic periods of economic bonanza Cubans lived as a result of intermittent increases of sugar price in the world market did not suffice to overcome the serious structural

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7Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, 149–52.
problems of the Cuban economy.\textsuperscript{11} In Farber’s view, “despite its modest degree of economic diversification and periods of relative prosperity often associated with war conditions abroad, Cuba remained an essentially monoculture economy relying heavily on a declining sugar industry,” up to the revolution in 1959.\textsuperscript{12} The role that the sugar industry played in Cuba’s economy with respect to the U.S. and world economy, and the way in which this industry operated were instrumental to the stagnation and instability of the Cuban economy.\textsuperscript{13} The Reciprocity treaty of 1934 also contributed to Cuba’s stagnant economy and uneven development. As a corollary, local industries had to face strong foreign competition with little or no tariff protection, thus discouraging the establishment of new enterprises and the expansion of manufactures other than light consumer goods, food products, and clothing.\textsuperscript{14} So even in the 1950s, Cuba lacked the industrial development that was emerging in other Latin American countries.

As a response to the contraction of the sugar world market at the end of the Korean War, Fulgencio Batista’s government launched a plan to attract foreign investment. The purposes of this plan were multiple: to diversify the economy, to develop the industries, to control inflation, and to improve the economic condition of the country.\textsuperscript{15} In so doing, Batista also expected to calm the political turmoil provoked by economic instability and his rise to power by way of a coup, effectively breaking the constitutional order in March of 1952.\textsuperscript{16} He implemented a policy of tax breaks on machinery and raw material imports, and foreign financial investments in the

\textsuperscript{11}For an analysis of the Cuban economy in the 1950s, see Santamaría García, “Evolución económica, 1700–1959,” 114–25.
\textsuperscript{12}Farber, \textit{The Origins of the Cuban Revolution}, 22; Pérez, \textit{Cuba between Reform and Revolution}, 224–30.
\textsuperscript{13}Santamaría García, “Evolución económica, 1700–1959,” 121.
\textsuperscript{14}Pérez, \textit{Cuba between Reform and Revolution}, 226.
\textsuperscript{15}Farber, \textit{The Origins of the Cuban Revolution}, 30.
\textsuperscript{16}For a fuller analysis on Batista’s emergence as a key political figure in the Cuba’s history see the chapter six and seven from Robert Whitney, \textit{State and Revolution in Cuba: Mass Mobilization and Political Change} (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
island. Foreign investors multiplied their operations in sectors such as tourism, the chemical and oil industries, manufacture, and construction. He also launched in 1954 the Social and Economic Development Plan, which promoted a policy of expenditures in public infrastructures and services to compensate for the effects of decreasing sugar production and exports.

Batista’s measures did not bring a significant improvement to Cuba’s economic and social situation. In fact, the modest degree of economic diversification achieved as a consequence of this strategy did not substantially change the monoculture character of the Cuban economy, and failed to address the massive unemployment, especially during the eight to nine months of tiempo muerto each year (the “dead time” of sugar non-production). “Public debt rose to $788 million in 1958, and Cuba’s international reserves fell dramatically from $500 million—when Batista took power in 1952—to only $100 million when he was overthrown at the end of 1958.”17 Many analysts agree that the two main causes of this situation may be found in tax breaks on imports and foreign investments, which prevented the Cuban government from gaining the revenue needed to support public services programs, and the corruption of public officials and their business associates.18 Capital also flew back to U.S. investors and industry because of the absence of sufficient incentives to re-invest in the island’s economy.19

Pérez summarizes the situation of Cuba’s economy of that period: “[b]etween 1952 and 1954, the decline in the international sugar market precipitated the first in a series of recessions … during the decade.”20 Because the sugar industry and production was highly conditioned by unstable world market prices and sugar quotas unilaterally established by the U.S., uncertainty pervaded Cuba’s economy and social life. The deepening of economic problems, particularly

20Pérez, *Cuba between Reform and Revolution*, 226.
during the 1950s, had very significant socio-cultural and political implications. The massive and chronic unemployment that resulted from the brief sugar crop added to this uncertainty and seriously disappointed popular expectations and aspirations for a better life.\textsuperscript{21} Even though some Cubans experienced brief moments of certain improvements in their conditions of life, such as the immediate post-World War II period, “economic discontent, frustration, and lack of hope marked” the psyche of most Cubans most of the time.\textsuperscript{22} As many historians agree, a sentiment of social decline prevailed among diverse social strata.\textsuperscript{23} In referring specifically to middle class sectors, a small portion of the population, Pérez argues that gradually they “were losing the ability to sustain the consumption patterns to which they had become accustomed.”\textsuperscript{24} Their consumption patterns, which emulated those of middle class Americans, clashed with the stagnation and uneven development of Cuba’s economy.\textsuperscript{25} According to Pérez, the so-called “American way of life” exerted such a degree of influence on the consumption patterns of urban middle and upper-middle classes that, “life [in 1950s] Havana was considerably more expensive than in any North American city.”\textsuperscript{26} Yet, while the United States per capita was $2000, the Cuban per capita income was $374!\textsuperscript{27} In order to maintain those excessive consumption standards of a few in the 1950s, the sugar industry would have had to increase significantly its levels of production in a short amount of time. This was a very unlikely scenario considering the Cuban sugar industry’s continuing dependence on the fixed terms of reciprocity treaties, and unstable world market prices. On the other hand, while some researchers point out that the

\textsuperscript{21} According to several scholars, Cuba’s unemployment during the late 1950s rose to more than 16 %. See Farber, \textit{The Origins of the Cuban Revolution}, 22,30; Santamaría García, “Evolución económica, 1700–1959,” 124.
\textsuperscript{22}Farber, \textit{The Origins of the Cuban Revolution}, 22.
\textsuperscript{23}Pettiná, “Sociedad, 1902–1959,” 228.
\textsuperscript{24}Pérez, \textit{Cuba between Reform and Revolution}, 226.
\textsuperscript{26}Pérez, \textit{Cuba between Reform and Revolution}, 225.
\textsuperscript{27}Ibid.
macro-economic and living standard indicators show that the Cuba of the 1950s ranked high in comparison to other Latin American countries, it is worth noting that those indexes hide substantial differences between the urban and rural areas, and especially between the capital city and the rest of the country. Those indicators also mask other huge disparities and gaps between social classes, gender, and ethnic groups in terms of employment, income, health, and education opportunities.  

As mentioned above, the acute problems of the Cuban economy contributed to a widespread sense of dissatisfaction and frustration across the social spectrum, including poor farmers in the countryside, the working classes in the city, and even many in the “middle classes” whose future seemed precarious. Prior to Batista’s military coup, a hope for change was increasingly growing in the majority of the population. Many people put their hope of change on the emergent populist *Ortodoxo* political party, which focused its political message on nationalism and fighting against corruption. Some months before the elections, foreseeing the likely electoral victory of the *Ortodoxos*, Batista led a military coup on March 10, 1952 violating the constitutional order, and again taking control of the country. His purpose and the purpose of those sectors that encouraged and supported him—including the U.S. government—was supposedly to sweep out the political and economic corruption of the Auténticos governments, and to respond adequately to the economic challenges from abroad.  

According to Luis Martínez-Fernández, “Batista’s coup and the swift consolidation of his regime can be attributed in large measure to the influence of sugar interests concerned that the anticipated overproduction of sugar in 1953 would trigger a devastating fall in sugar prices. They rationalized that only a dictator could impose production limits on those sectors most likely to protest, namely unionized sugar workers… Batista did not become the master planter; he was, rather, a hired overseer, and as such, he drew his authority from Cuba’s elites and foreign interests.”
social uncertainty and distrust with regard to the state of affairs contributed to indifference among many people regarding the military coup. Some even saw it as a possible way to achieve the change needed. Yet Batista’s regime did the exact opposite. As before, the economic agenda of the government benefitted the Cuban wealthy sectors and foreign interests, particularly from the U.S., rather than addressing the serious economic and social problems of the country. In fact, by many indicators the problems were exacerbated: poverty increased, corruption prevailed, and repression of political opponents became bloodier, particularly of those associated of insurgent movements, such as the 26 of July Movement and the Students Revolutionary Direction.  

As Pérez claims, the expanding popular and military rebellion against Batista’s dictatorship during the late 1950s transformed an unsatisfactory socio-economic situation into an unsustainable and intolerable political-economic conflict. In 1958, the insurgency led by Fidel Castro had successfully advanced and won control of three eastern provinces corresponding to “the region making up more than 80 percent of the total sugar land and accounting for more than 75 percent of the annual crop.” Batista’s supporters outside the government, including Washington, came to realize that the defeat of the regime was inevitable and even necessary. While seen as a convenient guarantor of U.S economic interests before, Batista had become so unpopular that his permanence in power threatened those interests. The U.S. government attempted to facilitate Batista’s exit with a political solution that would also prevent the victory of Fidel Castro’s troops. But the plan failed. On December 31, 1958 Batista left the country; a few days later the Rebel Army made its triumphant entrance into Havana. In Pérez words: “In

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30Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, 230–33.
31Ibid., 234.
the end, U.S. hegemony contributed powerfully to galvanizing the very forces it sought to contain: nationalism and revolution.”


As Batista’s government increased its repression and the climate of uncertainty and insecurity increased, so the insurrection against Batista’s regime grew and turned into a popular movement that gained much support among the people. Diverse sectors of the population, i.e. students, middle class, working people, and peasants, joined the struggle in different ways. The general strike on January 1, 1959, the clearest manifestation of popular support to the insurrection, marked the beginning of the “Cuban revolution”.

With the triumph of the revolutionary forces a new period started in Cuba’s history. The first five years of the revolution were very dynamic, intense, conflictual, and complex. Different groups in the wide range of political forces that participated in the struggle against Batista varied in their motivations, political goals, and ideological orientations. The new provisional revolutionary government constituted a coalition in which representatives of the formerly established political parties took part. From the beginning, however, it became clear that the real authority fell upon the 26 of July Movement, on the Rebel Army, and most of all on its leader Fidel Castro. This does not mean that the 26 of July Movement and the Rebel Army were ideologically monolithic. There were moderate and liberal anticommunist elements within them, some of whom came from Cuba’s urban middle class and who integrated themselves into the insurrectional forces to defeat Batista and reinstate the constitutional order. They were generally opposed to going further in terms of social transformations. While Castro’s leadership was undeniable, and other leaders had to consult and negotiate with him, he also had to strategically

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33Pérez, Cuba under the Platt Amendment, 1902–1921, 376–79.
34Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, 237–38.
navigate between those evident differences in order to maintain the unity of the revolutionary forces while ensuring that the revolutionary impetus and some of its key goals not be compromised.  

The revolution brought a new age for Cuba. As Pérez notes, “[d]istinction between the past and the present was drawn without difficulty, with almost celebratory unanimity.” The previous critical condition of Cuba’s economy and the discredited public and political institutions of the previous regime, marked a sharp contrast with the promises of social justice and new opportunities for all, especially for those less socially favored by the former system, generated great enthusiasm during the first years (1959-1962) of the revolution. Castro’s enormous charisma and magnetic eloquence played a key role in helping forge the huge collective euphoria that accompanied the revolutionary process during its early years. His revolutionary rhetoric of socio-economic justice, national sovereignty, political change, and social progress resonated with, and even raised, people’s expectations. A growing popular demand for making those promises concrete followed, encouraging policy makers in more and more “radical” directions. The enactment of laws such as the urban and agrarian reforms, and the government intervention in telephone and electricity companies, for example, revealed the nationalistic and popular character of the revolutionary project. These and numerous other

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36Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, 238.
37Ibid., 242.
38The Agrarian Reform Law deserves a special mention because of its impact on the lives of el campesinado (peasants), and on Cuba’s economy, and the relations between Cuba and the U.S. The law was enacted in May, 1959. It stated that with the exception of land engaged in the production of sugar, rice, and livestock, all real estate holdings were restricted in size to 1000 acres. Maximum limits were fixed at 3333 acres. “Land exceeding these limits was nationalized, with compensation provided in the form of twenty-year bonds bearing an annual rate of 4.5 percent… Expropriated lands were to be reorganized into state cooperatives or distributed into individual holdings of sixty-seven acres, with squatters, sharecroppers, and renters receiving first claim to the land which they were working” (Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, 243).
reform measures, implemented during the first months of 1959, had a profound impact on people’s lives:

The early reform measures won the revolutionary government widespread popular support, instantly. Workers, peasants, the unemployed received benefits that were immediate and direct. Labor received wage increases, the unemployed received jobs. The urban proletariat received rent and utility rate reductions. Peasants received land and credit. That Afro-Cubans made up a disproportionate share of the uneducated, unskilled, and unemployed meant that they were among the principal and immediate beneficiaries of the early distributive policies of the revolution. Moreover, in March 1959, the revolutionary government abolished legal discrimination, and scores of hotels, beaches, night clubs, resorts, and restaurants were opened to blacks.\(^{39}\)

Although approved by the provisional government, some of these policies were resisted by representatives among the moderates and liberals. Pérez claims that the scope and speed of the transformations conflicted with their ideological frameworks, and the legal and institutional structures they wanted to preserve.\(^{40}\) As a result, complex processes of negotiation ensued between different factions in the government and their supporters, including grassroots organizations. Moreover, a closer collaboration between Castro, his closest supporters, and the leaders of the *Partido Socialista Popular* (the Communists) was required in order to go forward with the process of social transformations.\(^{41}\) This was precisely the issue that preoccupied many “liberal wing” revolutionaries. The ideological and political tensions within the armed forces, government, civil organizations, and trade unions intensified. In the midst of such a confusing climate, people looked to Castro for direction, and for many of them he embodied “the

\(^{39}\)Pérez, *Cuba between Reform and Revolution*, 243.

\(^{40}\)Ibid., 241. For a fuller discussion of some of the policies that contributed to volatile tensions between different groups in the revolutionary government see Pettiná, “El desarrollo político, 1898–1962,” 382–83.

\(^{41}\)At the beginning of the Revolution no cabinet official of the provisional government was a member of the PSP (communist party). Fidel Castro had not shown Marxist ideological tendencies in his public statements even though important rebel chiefs such as Raul Castro y Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara were deeply influenced by some aspects of Marxist thinking and practice. Nonetheless, even before 1959 the 26 of July Movement made alliance with the PSP because of its influence on workers and trade unions, to organize the general strike that preceded the entrance of the Rebel army in Havana. As Pérez explains, “Fidel Castro needed the Cuban communist Party, an organization of singular discipline and preparation, with historic ties to mass organizations and political connections to the socialist bloc” (Pérez, *Cuba between Reform and Revolution*, 245–46).
revolution.” As a result, his political position and popularity grew, as well as his control of the government. Resignations and substitution of head officials were combined with the incorporation of more communist elements into the government and the armed forces.42

The economic and social measures implemented by the revolution, and in particular the Agrarian Reform Law were not well received by the social segments associated with the Batista’s regime, representatives of Cuban industrial sector, landowners, and U.S. companies.43 The Agrarian Reform and the growing relevance of the Popular Socialist Party (PSP) in Cuba’s political life alarmed property owners and U.S. economic and political powers. The U.S. government began to adopt a more aggressive stand against the revolutionary process, through economic pressures, sabotaging Cuban economy, supporting the internal counterrevolution, and covert military actions and plans for invading the island.44 The hostility and the attacks continued during the following two years, reaching the most explicit and strongest manifestation in the failed Bay of Pigs (Playa Girón) invasion in April, 1961.

The confrontation between the two governments escalated very quickly as each part toughened their diplomatic positions and political-economic countermeasures. As a result, diplomatic relations were broken. The U.S. government decreed an economic embargo (blockade) against Cuba and intensified its effort to overthrow the revolutionary government. The Cuban government nationalized all U.S. properties in the island, re-established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, and initiated an era of strong economic, political, and ideological ties with Moscow and the rest of the Socialist bloc. Almost overnight, Cuba became a key factor in the Cold War in the region, which reached its climax during the Missile Crisis in

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42Resignations and substitutions included those of the President of the Republic Manuel Urrutia and the Prime Minister José Miró Cardona. See Pettiná, “El desarrollo político, 1898–1962,” 383.
43For a detailed recount of U.S. reaction to the Agrarian Reform Law and its aftermath, see Leslie Dewart, Christianity and Revolution (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1963), 35–40.
44Ibid., 41–70.
October, 1962. These were very critical times for the Cuban revolution, for the Cuban people, and—under the cloud of threatening nuclear war—for the people of the whole region, perhaps even the world. Its own survival was at a stake. In Pérez’s opinion, the adoption of the socialist path—unexpected for some and feared for others—“must be seen as part political…, but above all pragmatic. It was to obtain protection and support without which the revolution would have eventually faltered and inevitably collapsed.”45

Some scholars affirm that a direct effect of the confrontation with the U.S. government was the radicalization of the Cuban revolution, with its consequent alignment with the Soviet Union and the adoption of a Marxist-Leninist political-ideological orientation.46 While it is debatable the degree to which Castro saw himself as a “Communist,” there are documented instances in which he seems to have shifted in his thought. Early in 1961, he publically defined the “revolution” as “socialist,” a few days prior to the invasion of Bay of Pigs, when a group of B-26 bombers piloted by Cuban exiles attacked Cuba’s air-force bases. Later that year, in November, he proclaimed “I am a Marxist-Leninist, and I shall be one until the last day of my life.”47 The confrontation also served to revive and reinforce powerful nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments; the situation helped the revolutionary leadership to gain a widespread popular support for the course of the revolutionary process. There is a great deal of scholarship about the accelerated, multiple, and complex phases, with many social actors and contested processes that conditioned and provoked such a dramatic transition from a triumphant insurrection of populist inspiration to a radical Marxist-Leninist revolution. For the purpose of

45Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, 249.
46Ibid., 247–53; Farber, The Origins of the Cuban Revolution.
47Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, 252
this chapter, I find it more useful to focus on what this transition represented for the Cuba of this time in socio-economic and political terms.\(^{48}\)

In expropriating U.S.-owned companies and properties and the instating state control over all key sectors of private enterprise, the government launched a sudden structural turn of the Cuban economy: this was the start of a process of collectivization of the economy that reached its highest expression in the so-called ‘revolutionary offensive’ in 1968.\(^{49}\) Throughout these years, State planning became the mechanism to organize the production of goods and services, and to lead the economic development of the country. It also became a central factor in the insertion of Cuba into the Socialist bloc trade. The Cuban state assumed the management of the main branches of industry and economy (a task for which ministers and bureaucrats were not prepared, with dire implications for the functioning of the economy). In addition, the leaders of the revolution sought to overcome the critical condition of the economy through rapid industrialization and agricultural diversification. This meant reducing the economy’s dependence on sugar production. In this new context, it also required facing a set of new difficulties and challenges. Industrial managers confronted enormous problems due to the lack of raw material and replacement parts, which was a direct consequence of the U.S. economic embargo. Since industries depended heavily on U.S. machinery and replacements, a significant number of plants were virtually paralyzed; transportation was one of the most affected sectors. The economy also suffered from the lack of qualified technical and administrative personnel. And many


professionals, engineers, technicians, executives, and managers emigrated to the U.S. when the companies for which they worked were nationalized by the state and they confronted drastic declines in their lifestyles. Inevitably, important administrative positions were filled with committed revolutionaries who lacked expertise or qualification. And many of the economic problems and failures during that period can be traced to excessively bureaucratic and centralized planning and control of the economy, lack of training, institutional infrastructure, and inadequate management.\(^{50}\)

As the substitution of replacement parts coming from eastern European socialist countries became an impractical solution because they did not fit US-made machinery, the government opted for a gradual replacement of U.S. made machinery with Soviet and European socialist countries’ equipment and production technologies. This industrial restructuration took time and resources, which were in short supply. Meanwhile, large sectors of Cuban industry remained unproductive with negative consequences for overall economic growth. In addition, the reorientation of the Cuban trade toward socialist countries (from Eastern Europe and China) involved other logistic difficulties that contributed to the worsening economic situation.\(^{51}\)

By 1963, the efforts of substituting imports by means of industrializing and diversifying the economy had failed, and agricultural production had declined significantly. Sugar production was the lowest in twenty years, dropping from 6.7 million tons in 1961 to 3.8 million tons in 1963. Even so, sugar exports increased, leading the revolutionary government to reconsider again the place of the sugar industry within the economy. The sugar industry regained the position it traditionally had after the price of sugar around the world rose in 1963. In other words, instead of import substituting development, as planned, Cuba augmented its dependence


\(^{51}\)Pérez, *Cuba between Reform and Revolution*, 261–65.
on imports. According to Pérez, “[t]he balance of trade deficit increased from $14 million in 1961 to $238 million in 1962, to $323 million in 1963, almost all of which was incurred with socialist bloc nations, $297 million with the Soviet Union alone.”52 While the revolutionary process transformed radically Cuba’s social, cultural, political structures and national identity, it was not able to change the dependent character of its economy.

People felt the effects of a troubled economy through the increasing scarcity of food supplies and basic consumer goods, a situation that became more severe by 1962. In order to respond to the shortage and attempting to guarantee a fair distribution of limited resources, the government implemented a food rationing system, which was gradually expanded to include other goods. Although indicative of the severity of the crisis, this and other distributive policies also sent a message about the values of the revolution and the egalitarian society its leaders tried to build. As Farber affirms, “Cuba achieved the greatest degree of equality in the first years after the Revolution (1959-64).”53 Despite the enormous difficulties and challenges faced in those years, generally speaking most people concretely benefitted in many ways, and supported the revolutionary process.

Yet, there was also a massive exodus; thousands of exiles left the island. Many left the country fearing prosecution for their involvement in the Batista dictatorship, others because their economic and political interests were affected, and yet others because of fear of “Communism.” Nevertheless, many others found sufficient reasons for being supportive in the numerous social benefits that the revolutionary project brought to them, particularly to the less favoured by the previous system: social security, urban reforms, overall improvement of health care and living conditions, and the elimination of the private ownership of hospitals, schools, beaches, hotels,

52Ibid., 258.
53Farber, Cuba since the Revolution of 1959, 85.
resorts, and clubs, which allowed people to access those facilities, something they could not afford before for economic, social, and racial reasons.

The literacy campaign in 1961 was one of the greatest accomplishments of the revolutionary project during this period. Besides reducing significantly illiteracy rates, particularly in rural zones, the campaign set the basis for developing a high standard national educational system, a crucial aspect of the kind of social development sought by the revolutionary government.\textsuperscript{54} This strategy pursued a twofold aim: to elevate the education of the population, which was relevant from an economic point of view, and to promote a political/ideological formation—above all among younger generations—in accordance with “revolutionary” and “socialist” values.\textsuperscript{55} For our purposes here, suffice it to say that many Cubans, especially the historically poor and marginalized, had many good reasons to support the revolution.

The first five years of the revolution were very complex and conflictive from all points of view. But the social benefits it brought to the majority of the population and the steps toward an egalitarian society were not enough to guarantee its survival. The Cuban revolutionary project faced multiple threats and obstacles, from U.S. administration’s hostility and aggressiveness to regional isolation, internal counterrevolution, and often misguided economic and political policies. Since the revolution was not a fixed project, a neat package, the issue was not whether or not it could be “preserved,” but under the pressure of circumstances: what could be continued; what had to be sacrificed; and what new accommodations/compromises—political and economic—had to be forged. In retrospect, it is clear that Party and government officials saw the most promising path ahead in allying themselves politically, economically, and ideologically

\textsuperscript{54}Ibid., 76–77.

\textsuperscript{55}Pérez, \textit{Cuba between Reform and Revolution}, 272–75. It is in this respect that the nationalization of private and religious schools that occurred in 1961 should be viewed. A fuller discussion of these interconnected issues goes beyond the scope of this project.
with the Soviet Union in order to continue the revolution. They also saw it necessary to increase the collectivization of the means of production and distribution of wealth, as well as increase state control of society through political and civil organizations. Not surprisingly, this choice contributed significantly to create in many people sentiments of confusion, uncertainty, and ambivalence regarding the course of the process. In the years to come, until the early 1970s, the revolution continually faced new difficulties and challenges. And the government frequently had to redesign socio-economic and political strategies and to try to correct previous mistakes.

Cultural, Socio-Political and Theological Features of Cuban Protestantism before the Revolution

The picture of the sociocultural and political landscape of pre-revolutionary Cuba is not complete without also engaging the multiple changes that took place in the religious arena. Many of these changes are related to the reintroduction of Protestantism in Cuba by U.S. missionaries and its socio-cultural and theological influence on Cuban Protestants. The Cuban Presbyterian minister and historian Rafael Cepeda documented the key role that Cuban “patriot missionaries” played in the emergence of a Cuban Protestantism in the second half of the nineteenth century. He refers to them as Cuban patriots who participated in the anti-colonial struggles against Spain. Having first heard the gospel in Cuba or abroad, they also exercised pastoral work and, in some cases founded Protestant denominations (such as Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Methodists and

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56 At the inception of the revolutionary process numerous civil and social organizations emerged: CDR (Comités de Defensa de la Revolución), FMC (Federación de Mujeres Cubanas), CTC (Central de Trabajadores de Cuba), ANAP (Asociación Nacional de Agricultores Pequeños). These and others organizations were originally created by the government with the purpose of organizing and mobilizing the populace to fulfill the various campaigns mandated by the government and in doing so protect the revolutionary project. In addition, some sectors of the government saw these national organizations as instruments of population control.

57 Rafael & Molina-Rodriguez Cepeda, Carlos R., “Los misioneros patriotas, revisitados,” in La siembra infinita: Itinerarios de la obra misionera y la evangelización protestante en Cuba, Rafael & Carlos R. Molina Rodríguez Cepeda (Ginebra, Suiza; Matanzas, Cuba; Quito, Ecuador: CMI; SET; CLAI, 2011), 23–74. On the presence of foreign Protestants in Cuba from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century, see Marco A. Ramos, Panorama del protestantismo en Cuba: La presencia de los protestantes o evangélicos en la historia de Cuba desde la colonización española hasta la Revolución (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Caribe, 1986), 71–86.
Baptists) in Cuba before 1898. With the intervention of the U.S. in Cuba’s independence war against Spain in 1898, the nature and context of Cuban Protestantism changed substantially. As Theo Tschuy points out, the first missionaries and representatives of U.S. mainstream Protestant churches arrived almost simultaneously with the U.S. military with the purpose of reinitiating the Protestant work in the island that had previously been started by Cubans but was interrupted because of the war. And their missionary task was part of a broader agenda, which was an integral part of the U.S.’ agenda of political and cultural expansionism in the region. Most missionaries came from the South of the U.S., where the idea of annexing Cuba was very popular at the time. Their vision was of culturally “(North) Americanizing” Cuban society, and Cubans’ conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism was essential to accomplish that goal. U.S. mission boards interpreted Cuba’s Catholic and Hispanic roots “as antimodern, as an impediment to Cuba’s development, and they consciously sought to imprint U.S. values on Cuban society in order to bring it into the modern world and to make it a reliable partner of the United States.”

To a certain extent, the project of “Americanization” of Cuba through Protestant churches and schools brought tensions with the active participation of Cuban Protestant leaders in the struggle for independence. Their patriotic attitude had contributed to the acceptance of Protestantism among Cuban nationalist working and low middle class sectors in Cuba and in the

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U.S. As Corse points out, the nationalist ethos in early Cuban Protestant missionary efforts was “almost completely overshadowed by the work of the mission boards of the major U.S. denominations.” A growing presence and impact of U.S. missionaries contributed to diluting the early nationalist identity of Cuban Protestantism. Commentators point to the ways these missionaries reproduced culturally and institutionally the missionary and ecclesial schemes of their churches in the U.S., contributing to reshaping Cuban society along the lines of the “American way of life.” With the exception of the American Baptist Convention, U.S. mission boards seemed to lack interest in targeting industrial workers and rural populations, apparently less influential to the social transformation they sought. Instead, and with the purpose of minimizing the influence of the Catholic Church, U.S missionaries focused primarily on reaching the middle and high-middle classes, which were mainly found in the cities.

From a theological viewpoint, Cuban Protestant churches did not distinguish themselves from their U.S. “mother” churches. While coming from different theological and ecclesiological traditions, they shared in varying degrees the tendency to emphasize an individualist, pietistic, and moralist relation (faith in) to God. In general terms, U.S. missionaries’ understanding of their mission of transforming Cuba’s society had to do with molding the individual character of Cubans rather than struggling for social justice. Tschuy finds in the otherworldly theology taught by the missionaries, one of the elements that contributed to Cuban Protestant churches’ failure to assess the serious social problems of Cuba, e.g., the causes of its socio-economic

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64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 96.
underdevelopment. Cepeda claims that overall the discourse by Protestants focused on individual sin to “explain” Cuban woes; they preached individual conversion and discipline as the solution, meanwhile ignoring or resisting critical discourses that connected the present social context of the country with the neo-colonial status of the Cuban society. In his opinion, that helps explain why they did not know how to handle the economic crisis at the early 1930s. Most Protestants did not think in terms of “structures,” or that a radical structural change was needed in order for transformation to occur. Instead of working on a program of social action to help them face the situation, they opted for staying in “their sanctuaries listening to words of capitulation, singing hymns of poor music and worse theology, and saying long prayers.”

On the other hand, some church leaders, nonetheless, noted that several social problems traditionally condemned by Protestants, such as alcoholism, prostitution, and gambling, had deeper causes which could not be tackled and overcome simply by appealing to individual religious/moral conversion. The Evangelical Social Civic Movement (ESCM), which emerged within the Presbyterian Church during the revolution of the 1933 that provoked the fall of Gerardo Machado’s dictatorship, is an example of this contesting stand among Protestants. The appearance of this movement and its expansion to other churches, especially among lay people, was a response to the socio-economic and political situation of Cuba and its neo-colonial

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68 Rafael Cepeda, Vivir el evangelio: reflexiones y experiencias (La Habana, Cuba: Editorial Caminos, 2003), 100.
dependence to the U.S. In my view, it also reflected a re-reading of the Gospel and a renewed vision of the church and its mission. According to Tschuy, this movement demanded structural social reforms and was also strongly critical of clerical structure of the churches and the cultural and ideological influence of U.S. mission boards. While only lasting a few weeks due to political repression by subsequent governments, the lack of institutional support, and internal pressures in the churches, this movement kept the spirit of another kind of Christianity alive and gave to the alternative critical voices within Cuban Protestantism the opportunity to express their concerns and demands. And some of these voices continued to produce critical theological statements about Cuban society. For example, in 1936, H.G. Smith, superintendent of the Presbyterian Church, wrote: “It is not enough to say that Christ changes the lives of individuals…; Christ’s program—the Reign of God on this earth—has to do with the whole life.” And he added: “Will we give alms to the poor without attacking the capitalism system of acquisition and concentration of wealth and overabundance on one hand, and the millions of our fellow humans without employment, hungry, and living in the most abject poverty [on the other]?” In the same year, some Presbyterian youth, reflecting on similar issues, likewise questioned whether it is possible to be capitalist and Christian. “Can anybody explode workers and be genuinely called a Christian?”

Despite the impact of the ESCM within some sectors of Cuban Protestantism, historians point to the greater impact of U.S missionaries in terms of theology, moral values, and social projection, powerfully influencing the formation of the Cuban Protestant “identity.” Missionaries promoted the perception of Protestantism as a way to promote political democracy and economic

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72 Ibid., 98–99.
74 Rafael Cepeda, Apuntes para una historia del presbiterianismo en Cuba, 162.
development through the affirmation of individual freedom and capitalist entrepreneurial spirit. They strongly insisted that through Protestantism Cubans would be able to overcome their Hispanic Catholic socio-cultural and religious heritage, which they saw as the main cause of their socio-economic, political, and cultural backwardness.\textsuperscript{75} According to Tschuy, Max Weber’s theory of the relation between the spirit of capitalism and the Protestant ethic seemed to be assumed in most U.S. missionaries’ and Cuban Protestants’ understanding of the social function of Christian faith.\textsuperscript{76} The Protestants’ commonly held view of Protestantism as a guarantee of political freedom against the oppressive and reactionary “nature” of Catholicism gained new meaning, especially after the Russian revolution in 1917. Protestantism came to be accepted as “the ‘democratic bastion’ against socialism and bolshevism!”\textsuperscript{77} As Cepeda argues, anti-Catholicism and anti-Communism became the two main features of Protestantism in the island: “as Protestant, we were only taught to be anti-Catholics and anti-communist.”\textsuperscript{78} This widely spread anti-Catholic sentiment among Protestants also contributed to their lack of a serious and deep ecumenical consciousness and attitude.

The decade of the 1940s meant a shift in the panorama of the mainline Cuban Protestant churches. The visit of John R. Mott, founder of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), was decisive for the creation of the Cuban Council of Evangelical Churches (CCEC) in 1941.\textsuperscript{79} The organization of the Council of Churches was the materialization of an old dream of a group of Protestant leaders and missionaries. It is widely considered a key event in the life of the Cuban Protestantism, even though not all Evangelical churches joined this ecumenical endeavor. The

\textsuperscript{75}Tschuy, “El protestantismo en Cuba,” 98.
\textsuperscript{76}Ibid., 110, n.16.
\textsuperscript{77}Ibid., 97.
\textsuperscript{78}Rafael Cepeda, Vivir el evangelio, 100.
\textsuperscript{79}Carlos R. Molina-Rodríguez, “El protestantismo cubano en una era de revoluciones (1930–1961),” in La siembra infinita: Itinerarios de la obra misionera y la evangelización protestante en Cuba, Rafael & Carlos R. Molina Rodríguez Cepeda (Ginebra, Suiza; Matanzas, Cuba; Quito, Ecuador: CMI; SET; CLAI, 2011), 150.
foundation of the Seminario Evangélico de Teología (SET) at Matanzas in 1946 was another important ecumenical effort that made a difference in the life of several churches, especially the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Anglican churches. According to Carlos R. Molina, for the Cuban Protestantism the 1940s and 1950s were very fruitful in terms of missionary action, inter-denominational cooperation, and consolidation of a native leadership.

However, in his study of the economic and social basis of the Evangelical Church in Cuba in the early 1940s (1941), John Merle Davis pointed to the difficulties, weaknesses, and gaps of Cuban Protestant churches in the development of their mission. Davis analyzed the problems of Cuba’s dependent and underdeveloped economy almost exclusively based on sugar production, and the narrow missionary strategies put in place by mainline Protestant churches, as they mainly focused on middle class people as the object of evangelization. He concluded that this missionary strategy was very problematic, especially in a poor agricultural country. He also argued that the theological education of Cuban pastors was inadequate to address the needs of the rural population, which at the time comprised half the population of the country. As he put it, “the Gospel of Christ will be felt more deeply in Cuba when it appeals to the Cuban sources of ideology and motivation, and when it sets roots in Cuba rather than in U.S.”

Even Matanzas’s ETS, the most progressive Cuban Protestant theological institution at the time, was not appropriately equipped for such a task. As its curriculum was designed according to U.S. traditions, values and standards, it did not fully engage Cuban traditions or address Cuban social problems. Its faculty was not sufficiently informed about Cuban society and religious practices,

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80Ramos, Panorama del protestantismo en Cuba, 476–78.
81Molina-Rodríguez, “El protestantismo cubano en una era de revoluciones,” 168.
84Ibid., 151.
including non-Christian beliefs. Pastoral candidates did not receive the theological, sociological, and pastoral formation and training needed to face the challenges of living in the Cuban society.\textsuperscript{85}

So, even though mainstream Protestant churches engaged in a process of “Cubanization” in many respects, of their pastoral bodies and institutional leadership and missionary strategies, in most churches “the theological impulses by the early missionaries, emphasizing pietism over social action [e.g., social justice], remained dominant.”\textsuperscript{86} Accordingly, argues Jorge Ramírez Calzadilla, Cuban churches overall showed in their official discourse more concern about their ritual and institutional life, and their possibilities of providing religious education, than about their prophetic task of denouncing social injustices, inequalities, and corruption.\textsuperscript{87}

In contrast with mainstream churches, on the margins there were other small groups of Protestants who were critical of social “vices” (prostitution, gambling, alcoholism, etc.) and the political corruption of the time.\textsuperscript{88} One example of these critical currents was the \textit{Movimiento Social Cristiano} (Christian Social Movement-CSM) in Cuba, which was inspired by the Social Gospel Movement and the Stockholm Conference in 1925. This movement started within the Methodist church in the mid-1950s, led by the minister Manuel Viera Bernal, and later joined the CCEC. Its principal aim was the “Christianization of the social, economic, and political order” of Cuban society, as expressed in its “Declaration of Principles.”\textsuperscript{89} This movement forged a critical posture toward both “capitalist” and “communist” projects. While criticizing the huge socio-economic inequality produced by capitalism as a result of unfairly distributing wealth, the

\textsuperscript{85}Corse, \textit{Protestants, Revolution, and the Cuba-U.S. Bond}, 7–8.
\textsuperscript{86}Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{89}Quoted by Molina-Rodríguez, “El protestantismo cubano en una era de revoluciones,” 156.
members of this movement rejected communism as the most radical expression of secularism. They proposed the establishment of a political and economic democracy that could provide ‘freedom and bread’ to the people. In order to do so, the proponents of this document encouraged Protestants to actively participate in the social struggles, including workers’ and students’ struggles, and in the future political movements in Cuba.\textsuperscript{90} The leadership of the CSM tried to combine the traditional Protestant concerns with moral life and a more social reforms-centered approach. Yet, in a somewhat simplistic fashion, Tchuy insists that their assertions lacked concreteness and contextualization because they did not seriously engage a critical socio-economic analysis of Cuba’s reality, including its neo-colonial relation to the U.S. Nonetheless, this movement provided a sort of critical platform on which to build a more socially insightful theological thought.\textsuperscript{91}

For a time in the early 1950s people’s expectations were heightened, with the triumph of the \textit{Ortodoxo} party in the early 1950s elections. But these came crashing down with Batista’s military coup and the institution of a brutal dictatorship, supported by the U.S. government. Some historians report that a widespread socio-political apathy seemed to characterize the population. But, numerous Christians–both Catholics and Protestants–joined the struggle against Batista’s regime, even without the institutional support of their churches.\textsuperscript{92} While some pastors and priests were involved in the fight, “the overwhelming majority of pastors and church officials played no part in the rebellion.”\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{90}Molina-Rodríguez, “El protestantismo cubano en una era de revoluciones,” 156.
\textsuperscript{91}Tschuy, “El protestantismo en Cuba,” 107.
\textsuperscript{93}Corse, \textit{Protestants, Revolution, and the Cuba-U.S. Bond}, 10.
The Protestant Church/es in a Revolutionary Situation

Historians point to many indications of widespread support of the revolution among Protestants, which was widely interpreted as both a war of liberation and a popular social revolution that sought to favor the poorest sectors.94 Many Protestants were euphoric and enthusiastically supported the revolution, especially during the first two years in response to the nationalist and popular economic, political and social measures taken by the revolutionary government.95 There were also many cultural and religious reasons for this, to which I will return later. In contrast, from the beginning there were also conflicts and tensions between the Catholic hierarchy and the revolutionary government. The Catholic Church was generally known as the church of the Spanish colonial society, and as such remained connected to the wealthy sectors of the Cuban populations and unabashedly opposed the Communist/Marxist-Leninist overtones that the revolutionary process took on overtime.96

In contrast to the Catholic Church, “most Protestants saw no inherent conflict between their goals and the revolution’s nationalistic project.”97 More precisely, for many Cuban Protestants and U.S. missionaries supporting the “revolution,” the revolutionary leadership seemed to be seriously interested in carrying out a project of social modernization of Cuba as they envisioned it. In perceiving the revolutionary process as embodying many of the values proclaimed by Christianity, they viewed it as a spiritual movement, even as divinely inspired.98 They found in the new social reality an important context to advance their moral reform agenda. This was particularly the case because the revolution started to fight social

94Molina-Rodríguez, “El protestantismo cubano en una era de revoluciones,” 158.
95Rafael Cepeda, Vivir el evangelio, 19, 101.
96For a fuller discussion of the involvement of the Catholic Church with the revolutionary process and leaders see Dewart, Christianity and Revolution.
97Corse, Protestants, Revolution, and the Cuba-U.S. Bond, 10.
98Ibid., 16.
intemperance, traditionally condemned by Protestant churches. Some Protestant leaders also celebrated the freedom achieved through the revolution. In an article published in Heraldo Cristiano in May, 1959, Cepeda proclaimed: “Now we are trying to penetrate, with new vision, the intimate essence of a true revolution. Already we are free. Perhaps for the first time in history we are politically and economically free.” In a very controversial article, published in 1960, he even argued that “Fidel Castro is an instrument in the hands of God for the establishment of the God’s kingdom among men [sic].” Of course, not all Protestant leaders shared this view. Though it is uncertain if he approved of other aspects of the revolution, Justo González Carrasco, a Methodist, strongly criticized the violent and autocratic aspects of the Revolution, expressed in the public military tribunals resulting in the execution of many Batista supporters. Appealing for an end to these trials and executions, he advocated a “Christian revolution” of peace, love, and forgiveness.

In any case, in those tumultuous times following the vanquishment of Batista, relations between church and state were improving. According to Corse, “throughout 1959 and into 1960, Protestant missionaries and native pastors alike reported levels of cooperation from the government they had never seen before.” An example of the revolutionary government’s attitude toward Protestant churches and their participation in the revolution at its beginning was the appointment of some Protestant leaders, both pastors and lay people, as government

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100Corse, Protestants, Revolution, and the Cuba-U.S. Bond, 14–16.
104Corse, Protestants, Revolution, and the Cuba-U.S. Bond, 21.
officials. For their part, feeling challenged by the government’s focus on rural Cuba, the leaders of the CCEC launched a program in late 1959 with the purpose of helping people from rural areas to “satisfy” their material and spiritual needs. The program was ambitious; it sought to tackle deep social problems as a consequence of poverty conditions: illiteracy, unsanitary conditions, and malnutrition. They also promoted the creation of cooperatives aiming to enhance agricultural techniques, increase production, and improve nutrition.

By the means of these programs, these ecumenical Protestant leaders were showing Cuban believers the limitations of the individualistic, pietistic, and charity-oriented theological approach introduced by some of their U.S. counterparts. They encouraged church members to become seriously involved missiologically in the new, still gestating social order.

Overall, the relationship between Protestant churches and the state was fairly “positive,” especially when compared to the increasingly conflicting relations between the government and the Catholic hierarchy. As Ramos asserts, during the first two years of the revolutionary process, most Protestant churches’ regular activities were not substantially affected by the new political changes and socio-economic policies. They continued to develop their ecclesial programs and missionary strategies. Their educational institutions played an important role in their evangelistic strategies. And the theological and cultural influences from U.S. missionaries remained strong even as U.S.-Cuba relations quickly deteriorated. In Cuba the

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106 Corse, Protestants, Revolution, and the Cuba-U.S. Bond, 23–24.
107 Ibid., 24.
108 According to Corse, the first signs of conflict between Protestant churches and the government came from the newest denominations in Cuba (Brethren in Christ, Conservative Baptist, and Mennonites), still run by the original founding missionaries. By then, long-established denominations such as Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Eastern Baptists, were generally more supportive of the revolutionary project. See Corse, Protestants, Revolution, and the Cuba-U.S. Bond, 37. For a historical recount and analysis of the relations between the Cuban revolutionary government and the Catholic Church’s hierarchy during the first three years of the Revolution, see Dewart, Christianity and Revolution, 116–79.
mainstream Protestant churches did not see their cultural and ecclesiological identities altered by the breakdown of U.S.-Cuba relations.\textsuperscript{110} Their efforts since the late 1940s at becoming more independent from the U.S. mission boards had had to do with finances and internal organization more than with their theological views and cultural ethos.\textsuperscript{111}

Corse notes that “[by] mid-1960, [Castro’s] denial of Communist influence in the revolution had become hard to sustain, and for many Cuban Protestants this was an insurmountable problem.”\textsuperscript{112} As mentioned earlier, anti-Communism was a common denominator of the Cuban Protestant churches and of the Catholic Church too, and one of their main characteristics. Inevitably, in March, 1960, a committee representative of the Cuban Protestant churches chaired by Alfonso Rodríguez Hidalgo, a Presbyterian minister and the principal of SET, organized a meeting with Protestant leaders to discuss the role of their churches in the new social context; one of the main topics to analyze and to assess was the relation between Christianity and Marxism.\textsuperscript{113} In Adolfo Ham’s opinion, the aim of the meeting was to create an “anticommunist front” but that was not the outcome.\textsuperscript{114} The majority of participants recognized that the revolution was not a “Communist” revolution (yet) or inspired by Communists. However, they voiced their concerns for the privileged place Communist ideas were gaining in the government. They blamed communist ideas for the shortcomings of the process and the wrong decisions made by the leadership. Still, they expressed their conviction

\textsuperscript{110}Corse, \textit{Protestants, Revolution, and the Cuba-U.S. Bond}, 25.
\textsuperscript{111}Ramos, \textit{Protestantism and Revolution in Cuba}, 33–34.
\textsuperscript{112}Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{113}Ibid., 43–45.
that “the hand of God is behind the Cuban revolution, guiding our people and preparing the way for political freedom and social justice as well as for the progress of the Gospel.”\textsuperscript{115}

According to Cepeda, two events marked the end of the so-called “period of euphoria” among Christians, and their disenchantment with, separation from, or rejection of the revolutionary process: 1) the adoption of the Marxist-Leninist ideology by the state on April 15, 1961, and 2) the nationalization of education almost two months later, with the consequent shutting down of all private and religious schools. As he puts it, “an official declaration of adherence to socialism (with its known materialist-atheist content) brought us great uneasiness.” Yet, “the nationalization of all our schools was a heavy blow;” they were “the bridges we used to reach out to children in our evangelistic zeal, and through them the doors of their homes were opened... With the nationalization of the schools disenchantment became the general rule.”\textsuperscript{116}

Protestants’ stance toward the revolution changed radically.

Many report that the churches were not prepared to face such a dramatic shift. Many Protestants felt marginalized from a social process that, in their opinion, was going too far and too fast, putting in danger the very existence of the Church in Cuba. As a result, a significant number of pastors and members of all denominations joined the emigration to the U.S.\textsuperscript{117} Strong criticisms in response to governmental measures were voiced from many Catholics and Protestant pulpits, documents, and pastoral letters. Some of the criticisms echoed anticomunist attacks against the Cuban revolution coming from the U.S. government, the media, and Protestant mission boards. Such critical stances adopted by pastors and church leaders

\textsuperscript{115}Corse, \textit{Protestants, Revolution, and the Cuba-U.S. Bond}, 45 Corse points out that “[w]hatever concerns Protestants had about the government in March 1960, they by no means reached the level of panic and fury found in much of the catholic hierarchy or in the U.S. press at that time.” Corse, \textit{Protestants, Revolution, and the Cuba-U.S. Bond}, 47.

\textsuperscript{116}Rafael Cepeda, \textit{Vivir el evangelio}, 20.

\textsuperscript{117}Ramos, \textit{Protestantism and Revolution in Cuba}, 71–72.
contributed to increased confusion and uncertainty among Christians, especially among those who were sympathetic of some aspects of the revolutionary project, and many left the churches over this. This factor became central in their abandonment of churches.\textsuperscript{118} For some revolutionary Christians (Protestants and Catholics), criticisms of the government lacked credibility since most of their proponents had neither manifested the same critical attitude against the Batista’s dictatorship nor publicly showed concern for solving the serious problems of Cuban society.\textsuperscript{119}

The more the government implemented deeper “reforms” (agrarian reform, urban reform, nationalization of education, etc.) the more social tensions, class antagonisms, and ideological conflicts increased. Churches did not escape unscathed from these tensions and conflicts. Theologically unprepared to address the questions of structural change, many Protestant congregations floundered, losing members, with shrinking donations, losing major institutional heft with the closing of their schools, theologically and politically divided. Corse points out that, “[r]educed in numbers and restricted in their social role, most Protestant denominations retreated into a ‘bunker’ mentality, seeking to preserve what they could of their prerevolutionary identities.”\textsuperscript{120}

However, other Protestant leaders saw this situation as a providential opportunity for the church to discover its authentic nature and the meaning of its mission, and they supported the major choices and overall direction of the government.\textsuperscript{121} They committed themselves to the revolutionary process, though they felt a great sense of uncertainty because of its atheist overtones. CCEC’s adoption of the Cuban CSM’s ‘Declaration of Principles’ in 1960

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{118} Corse, \textit{Protestants, Revolution, and the Cuba-U.S. Bond}, 90.
\bibitem{119} Rafael Cepeda, \textit{Vivir el evangelio}, 104.
\bibitem{120} Corse, \textit{Protestants, Revolution, and the Cuba-U.S. Bond}, 101.
\bibitem{121} Rafael Cepeda, “La iglesia en una tierra nueva”; Berges and Arce, \textit{40 años de testimonio evangélico en Cuba}.
\end{thebibliography}
exemplifies this tension. The signatories and the supporters of this document advocated the establishment of a democratic and “Christian social order” that recognizes that it is in God that we find

the ultimate authority concerning man [sic] and history, and that is based upon the social principles of Christ, which postulates the value of the human personality, reverence for life, liberty of the individual, the spirit of service, social justice and the brotherhood of man [sic].\textsuperscript{122}

It was clear that the CCEC was committed to support a revolutionary and nationalistic project of social reconstruction, but they envisioned a process “that was Christ-centred and not materialistic or fully secularized.”\textsuperscript{123} By approving this document, those leaders supported the Christian spirit of social justice they identified in the revolution, but they rejected the growing identification and re-formulation of this agenda by government spokespeople increasingly in the terms of an atheistic Marxist-Leninist ideological position. Cepeda made explicit a similar view in the very early 1960s:

By joining unconditionally a system that challenges religious faith–even if it is only in theory–[the leaders of the revolution] limit the tremendous contributions that people with profound Christian convictions and great desire to serve the people in this critical hour of danger and opportunities…can offer to the revolutionary process.\textsuperscript{124}

These examples indicate that, for some Protestants sympathetic and supportive of the revolution, the Marxist-atheist orientation of key revolutionary leaders (subsequently adopted as the official ideology of the Communist Party and the government) signified a great challenge in their efforts to integrate themselves into the revolutionary process. Some were unwilling to undergo such a “test.” A much smaller group–in which Sergio Arce stood out–engaged in a process of rebuilding their ecclesiological/missiological identity in the process of participating actively with other Cubans and the government in the construction of a new society.

\textsuperscript{122}Quoted by Corse, \textit{Protestants, Revolution, and the Cuba-U.S. Bond}, 49.
\textsuperscript{123}Corse, \textit{Protestants, Revolution, and the Cuba-U.S. Bond}, 49.
\textsuperscript{124}Rafael Cepeda, “La iglesia en una tierra nueva,” 74.
Conclusion

In broad strokes, I have provided a panoramic view of the multilevel interrelated historical, social, political, economic, and religious factors shaping the “Cuban revolution.” I have also revisited the first five years after the triumph of the revolutionary forces in 1959, identifying some of the main actors, dynamics, and challenges that came with such enormous social shifts. My intention has been to provide the background against which Sergio Arce’s theology emerged and must be understood. Arce was certainly not alone in engaging the revolutionary process; he was part of and deeply influenced by a larger ecumenical movement that took seriously the theological implications for being Christian under the specific conflicting conditions that were being created. This movement was not great in numbers, but it significantly impacted leaders and members of some mainline Protestant churches and the ecumenical movements in Cuba. In the coming chapter, I outline Arce’s religious formation and theological education, highlighting key influences and stages in the development of his theological thought.
Chapter 2

Sergio Arce’s Theology in Revolution:
Main Influences and Stages of Development

Introduction

In this chapter, I provide a brief biographical sketch of Sergio Arce, particularly related to his religious formation and theological education, paying attention to the most important intellectual and ideological influences shaping the development of his perspectives. In broad strokes, I outline the various stages of the development of his theological thought, taking into consideration the diverse historical, socio-political, cultural, and theological contexts within which it was constructed. In no sense do I intend to deal with Arce’s thought exhaustively. In this chapter I limit myself to providing a brief sketch of Arce’s theological development, highlighting key influences, and outlining crucial historical shifts. In passing, I allude to the complex history of the Cuban revolutionary process throughout the last five decades as the context for the development of Arce’s theological thought. I note specially some of the main socio-political, economic, and cultural challenges Cuba has encountered: Cold War, U.S. government’s hostility to the Cuban revolution expressed through the economic embargo and multiple political maneuverings; Cuba’s integration into the Socialist Bloc and its collapse in 1989; and the influence of the Cuban revolution on liberation movements in Latin America, Asia, and Africa; and Arce’s responses to those changes. Finally, I briefly review several key writings, written between the early 1960s and the late 1990s, identifying enduring concerns, themes, and significant shifts.

Sergio Arce’s Intellectual/Ideological and Religious Formation

Sergio Arce was born in 1924 in Caibarién, Cuba. His parents were leaders of the Presbyterian Church: originally Baptist, his mother became Presbyterian and later worked as a
teacher in a Presbyterian school in the city. His father was a lay leader of the Presbyterian Church, and his uncle was a Presbyterian minister.¹ Arce’s specifically political-religious formation started very early in his life. As he writes, the revolutionary and anti-imperialist stance that characterizes his theological thought was forged in his home and nurtured in his home church, “even though it was called the church of the Americans.”² His secondary studies at La Progresiva in Cárdenas, in the province of Matanzas, Cuba, a well-recognized Presbyterian school, provided him with the opportunity to continue growing spiritually. Yet, he acknowledges that the influence of his pastor, “a man for whom the pastoral ministry had a socio-political meaning,” was central in his decision to become a Christian minister.³

In the early 1940s, the Presbyterian Church of Cuba sent him to do theological studies at the Evangelical Seminary of Río Piedras, in San Juan, Puerto Rico. While getting prepared for ministry, he met Dora Valentín, a Puerto Rican woman whom he later married in 1945. In the same year they returned to Cuba, where he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in 1946. He started his ministry in Nueva Paz, a small town about seventy kilometers from Havana. He also reinitiated his studies of philosophy and literature at the University of Havana, although he did not finish until shortly after the triumph of the revolution. During those years of theological and philosophical studies, Marxist theoretical currents (including Marxism-Leninism) were popular among some professors and students, and influenced the development of Arce’s theological and political frameworks. The encounter with such intellectuals, he recounted, confirmed his early intuitions that “there was more affinity between the principles of socialism and Christianity than

¹Sergio Arce, “Amo a mi patria, amo a mi iglesia,” in 40 años de testimonio evangélico en Cuba, ed. Reinerio Arce and Juana Berges (La Habana, Cuba: Caminos, 1999), 59.
²Ibid., 61.
³Ibid., 60.
He saw a similarity between the ethical/spiritual values of the Marxist utopia and the Reign of God proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth.\footnote{Sergio Arce, “Itinerario teológico,” in \textit{Panorama de la teología latinoamericana}, ed. Juan José Tamayo and Juan Bosh (Navarra, España: Verbo Divino, 2001), 115.}

Reflecting on his formation in Puerto Rico, Arce recalls that the patriotic (\textit{independentistas}) and socialist ideas of some professors and students served as a supportive ideological environment in which his “socialist” orientation deepened. This environment was also marked by a quest for the Hispanic cultural roots, as a mechanism of cultural resistance against U.S. political-economic control and cultural influence. This juncture played a decisive role in his budding theological formation. The encounter with the anthropocentric perspectives of the Spanish poets and authors from the so-called “Generación del 98”, particularly Miguel de Unamuno’s existentialism, helped him to refine his theological views.\footnote{According to Arce, Miguel de Unamuno is the thinker who was most influential in his intellectual development. Arce, “Amo a mi patria, amo a mi iglesia,” 80. In 1956, he wrote a thesis for a master’s degree in theology at Princeton Seminary on the theological implications of Unamuno’s existential philosophical thought. See Sergio Arce, “La lucha y la paz en Miguel de Unamuno,” Thesis submitted to the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Theology (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1956).} He found no significant contradictions; rather he saw similarities between these writers’ ethical values and those learned from his own theological tradition. The teachings of Angel M. Mergal were central to this process.\footnote{Ángel M. Mergal, \textit{Reformismo cristiano y alma española} (Buenos Aires, Argentina; México D.F., México: Editorial La Aurora-Casa Unida de Publicaciones, 1949).}

Arce summarizes his formation in these early years as follows:

The ethics of the Reformed tradition that I learned during my childhood and adolescence, the Marxist ideology of my university years, and the Christian existentialism from my theological education, colored by a Kantian historicism—not to say Marxist—coming from my tireless readings constituted the symbiosis that characterized my basic anthropocentrism, which worked as an “ideological filter” for my later formation.\footnote{Arce, “Itinerario teológico,” 116.}
Meanwhile, his pastoral practice in Nueva Paz helped him to know directly the deplorable living conditions of vast sectors of the population, especially in the rural areas: high unemployment, unsanitary conditions, illiteracy, and general scarcity. As part of his ministry, he started a missionary work in the town and neighboring rural areas that included literacy efforts, economic aids, and hygiene education. At the early stage in the development of his thinking, he was convinced that while this type of social action was necessary, it was not sufficient to transform the living conditions of the people.

Eventually Sergio Arce and Dora Valentín moved to Santa Clara, an important city at the center of the island. There they worked together with the purpose of starting a congregation. Also, they established a primary school in a marginal neighborhood and founded in their house a Christian center to host and support University students. Arce was also invited to teach theology at Matanzas Theological Seminary. But he also wanted to pursue further studies and the seminary/church encouraged him to do so. With Dora’s support, he applied to Princeton, and they (he, Dora and their son Reinerio) moved there for him to study for his Master’s degree in theology in 1955. Upon his return with his family to Cuba (1957), he continued his work in the Presbyterian Church, pastoring in the city of Santa Clara. But things had changed in the two years he was away. The political climate was tense and the rebel forces were already involved in the armed struggle in the mountains. Clandestine efforts were underway in various urban centers. Some young people of his congregation were involved in varying degrees in the struggle against Batista’s dictatorship. One of them was Aleida March, the young woman who later married Ernesto “Che” Guevara. Arce and Dora joined the civic resistance collaborating in different ways: distributing materials and political propaganda, covering with his “moral authority of
pastor” some clandestine actions of some of his parishioners, and interceding on behalf of members of the 26th of July movement in jail.\(^9\)

In 1959, after the victory of the revolutionary army, he and Dora returned to Princeton where he sought to complete his doctoral studies. While at Princeton, Arce was deeply influenced by professors such as John A. Mackay and Paul Lehmann. The guidance of John A. Mackay, who displayed a profound knowledge of Unamuno and other Hispanic thinkers, proved to be very helpful.\(^10\) And Paul Lehman helped deepen his knowledge of Barth’s theology. Lehmann also interpreted Marx and drew key social ethical implications that, in his view, resonated with the deepest Christian impulses. Arce found in Lehman’s ethical interpretation of Marx a source of inspiration, principles that coincided with his own evolving theological and ideological perspective; this is something he later made explicit.\(^11\)

Among the main theoretical and theological influence during these formative years, Arce highlighted Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.\(^12\) He refers to these three figures as “socialist” theologians who were committed to social struggles. In Barth’s case, Arce reflected in his later years that while he recognized Barth’s stature as a systematic theologian, he was more appreciative of his earlier writings on Christian social ethics than his *Church Dogmatics*.

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\(^9\)Arce, “Amo a mi patria, amo a mi iglesia,” 63.

\(^10\)John A. Mackay, *Don Miguel de Unamuno: su personalidad, obra e influencia* (Lima, Perú: Universidad Mayor de San Marcos, 1918). Mackay’s theological thought was influential in other important ways; for example, through his well-known distinction between the “theology from the balcony” and the “theology of the way,” as two different manners of doing theology. While the image of “the balcony” evokes the abstract and a-historical constructions of dominant theological traditions, “the way” points to theological reflections that take into consideration the social contexts. This methodological distinction would become a central aspect of Arce’s theological reflections. See John A. Mackay, *A Preface to Christian Theology* (New York, NY: Macmillan Co., 1946).


\(^12\)In the late 1950s and early 1960, being professor of theology at Matanzas’ Seminary, he wrote two papers on the theologies of Barth and Tillich. See Sergio Arce, *La doctrina de la justificación según Karl Barth*, Círculo Teológico no.16 (Matanzas, Cuba: Seminario Evangélico de Teología, 1964); Sergio Arce, “Cristo y la liberación social,” in *Teología en Revolución*, vol. I (Matanzas, Cuba: Centro de Información y Estudio “Augusto Cotto”, 1988), 45–56.
Arce himself commented that Barth’s explicitly socialist and anti-fascist theological reflections appeared more at the beginning of his career; this is what appealed to him most about Barth’s work.13 Bonhoeffer’s writings from the prison, his ethics and positive theological interpretation of secularization, also made a profound impact on Arce’s theological thought.14

Arce’s doctoral studies in Princeton coincided with the first three years of the Cuban revolution. During those years a massive exodus of Cubans to the U.S. took place. This exodus included numerous church members and pastors. Without finishing his dissertation (on the theology of Juan de Valdés, a Spanish humanist theologian from the sixteenth century), he and Dora decided to return to Cuba in the late 1961, responding to what they felt was an abandonment of the churches and the Seminary by those leaders and pastors.15 The Presbyterian Church appointed him as professor of systematic theology at Matanzas’s Seminary. He also worked as a pastor in a nearby church. He shared his church responsibilities with other roles in the Dirección Provincial de Educación. The officials in the Ministry of Education in the province of Matanzas asked him and Dora to collaborate in directing education at the provincial level, a responsibility they accepted as an expression of their “testimony of faith.”16

From the mid-1960s, Arce held leadership positions in the Cuban Presbyterian Church. From 1965 to 1984 he served as the General Secretary.17 In 1969 he was appointed as principal of the Seminario Evangélico de Teología at Matanzas, a position he held until 1984. He also played important roles in diverse ecumenical movements in Cuba and Latin America. He was a member of the executive committee of Church and Society in Latin America (ISAL) from 1967

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13 Arce, “Amo a mi patria, amo a mi iglesia,” 72.
16 Arce, “Itinerario teológico,” 117.
17 To be precise, the title of the position was the Permanent Secretary up until 1969, after which time it was renamed to General Secretary.

The rich experiences of participation in these and other national and international organizations and movements contributed to his evolving theological reflection. In particular he was deeply influenced by the political and theological thought of Camilo Torres, the Colombian Catholic priest who died in 1966 fighting with the guerrillas in Colombia. Torres’ life informed the development of Arce’s own theology and his contributions to the theology then emerging in the Cuban ecumenical movement. He found in Torres’s thought and practice a valuable Christian testimony of commitment to justice. He saw in Torres’s Marxist posture a relevant theoretical and practical point of reference in helping Cuban revolutionary Christians to formulate the mission of the church and their role in a socialist Marxist-Leninist society.18 In the 1970s, as director of the center of studies of the CCEC, Arce organized and named the Conferences in honor of Camilo Torres, with the purpose of stimulating the production of a Cuban revolutionary theological thought, which also reverberated with key insights of liberation theology which was emerging in many places across Latin America in the 1970s.19

Through participation in the Christian Conference for Peace Arce met key theologians from the Eastern European socialist countries; he learned from their experiences, at the same time contrasting them with his own experiences in Cuba. In particular, Arce was deeply influenced by the thought of the Czech theologian Joseph Hromádka, particularly his interpretation of contemporary atheism.20 Likewise, he met and was influenced by

representatives of European political theologies such as Jürgen Moltmann, Johann Baptist Metz, and Dorothee Söelle. Proponents of black liberation theology in the U.S. like James Cone also informed and challenged his elaboration of a Cuban theology in a revolutionary context.\textsuperscript{21} As he gained insights from their theological perspectives and interpretations, he refined his own original theological approach in response to his unique socio-political, economic, and cultural context.

Similarly, his participation in conferences in Latin America put him in touch with representatives of liberation theology. His early contacts (since 1960s) with Latin American Protestant and Catholic theologians and social scientists through ISAL and CCP sharpened his analytical and hermeneutical approach. These interactions helped him clarify his position within the theological debates in Latin America on themes like the nature of the historical projects of liberation, Marxist-Christian dialogues, and the appropriate political roles of Christians in the construction of “socialism.”

Arce recognized the parallels between many of his theological assertions and liberation theologians’ interpretations of the idolatrous character of the “capitalist socio-economic system,” the historical, political and economic character of salvation/liberation, and the socio-structural nature of sin. During the 1970s and 1980s he also voiced strong criticisms against some of the most prominent liberation theologians. In particular, he thought they lacked concreteness when writing about historical projects of liberation.\textsuperscript{22} Most important here is that for many years Arce has reproached liberation theology’s proponents for neglecting the Cuban revolutionary “experience” and the theological reflections that have emerged from it. He later observed that his


\textsuperscript{22}Arce, “Camilo Torres and the Liberation of Theology,” 48.
critical stances might have contributed to a certain isolationism of Cuban theologians from their colleagues, especially during the first half of the 1970s. He also acknowledged that some of these differences were gradually overcome, and that the debates became more frequent and constructive. Nevertheless, one cannot deny the profound impact that figures such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Hugo Assmann, Miguel Concha, José Porfirio Miranda, Raúl Vidales, Augusto Cotto, Luis Rivera Pagán, and Franz Hinkelammert exerted upon Arce’s own theological journey. At different times and in varying degrees they influenced his theology.

From an ideological/political viewpoint, the influences of Fidel Castro and Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara were also central in the development of his theology. This is most evident in his frequent references to and theological interpretation of their political thought.24

A Theological Itinerary: Sergio Arce’s Theology in Revolution

Precisely because the Cuban revolutionary process has been the socio-political, economic, cultural, and ideological context in which Arce has articulated and formulated his theology, he has called it Theology in Revolution (TR). As he stated, the revolution was his locus theologicus! His theology is the result of almost fifty years of creative and committed reflection on Christian faith and the church’s mission within the Cuban revolutionary process.

1.1961-1968: Emergence and Founding of a Cuban Revolutionary Theological Perspective

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23 Arce, “Amo a mi patria, amo a mi iglesia,” 70–73. A good example of how some Latin American Liberation theologians admit to having neglected Cuban theologians and the later re-encounter between them can be found in Augusto Cotto, “El diálogo necesario entre Cuba y el resto del continente,” in Praxis cristiana y producción teológica. Materiales del Encuentro de teologías celebrado en la Comunidad teológica de México (8 al 10 de octubre de 1977), eds. Jorge Pixley and Jean Pierre Bastián (Salamanca, España: Sígueme, 1979), 239-48; See also Hugo Assmann’s comments in “Discusión” in Praxis cristiana y producción teológica. Materiales del Encuentro de teologías celebrado en la Comunidad teológica de México (8 al 10 de octubre de 1977), eds. Jorge Pixley and Jean Pierre Bastián (Salamanca, España: Sígueme, 1979), 49-49.

With the triumph of the revolution and the concomitant construction of a socialist economic and political system, the Cuban social reality radically changed. As mentioned in chapter one, the churches in the early 1960s were not apparently prepared to face the new context and its conflicting implications. The traditional ways of doing theology and being church did not help Christians to creatively interpret the new reality and to respond to it in a critical and constructive way. Churches needed a theology that guided the practices and expressions of faith of their members toward an involvement in the transformation of society. Arce’s theological reflections sought to respond to such challenge. Arce has often questioned the existence of what could be properly called a Cuban theological thought before the revolution.

In his view, with very few exceptions, Cuban theological reflections lacked the necessary link between faith and the socio-economic and political context. Generally speaking, in his view, the type of theology taught in most churches and seminaries reproduced the socio-cultural patterns and a-historical and spiritualistic hermeneutical framework provided by U.S. missionaries. This was the context in which he began to articulate his theological and ecclesiastical perspectives.

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25 As Arce put it with little qualification, “the triumph of the Cuban Revolution took by surprise the Church in Cuba…without denominational distinctions; the church was theologically unprepared, ideologically reactionary, and pastorally inadequate.” Sergio Arce, “Teología cubana: teología en Revolución,” in La teología como desafío (La Habana, Cuba: Consejo Ecuménico de Cuba, 1980), 63; Sergio Arce Martínez, “Church and Revolution,” in The Church and Socialism: Reflections from a Cuban Context, 10–32; Sergio Arce, “La experiencia de los cristianos en el proceso revolucionario cubano,” in Fe cristiana y revolución sandinista en Nicaragua. Apuntes para el estudio de la realidad nacional (Managua, Nicaragua: Instituto Histórico Centroamericano, 1979), 184–90; Raúl Gómez Treto, “La experiencia de los cristianos en el proceso revolucionario cubano,” in Fe cristiana y revolución sandinista en Nicaragua. Apuntes para el estudio de la realidad nacional (Managua, Nicaragua: Instituto Histórico Centroamericano, 1979), 197–203.


After the triumph of the revolution in 1959, he drew on the Bible in interpreting the new revolutionary context. His reflective work was part of an original effort to rethink the Christian faith in the light of a revolutionary situation unprecedented in Latin America. In 1962, delivering a lecture at the national convention of Cuban Presbyterian men, he stressed the necessity of rejecting the kind of spiritualistic and individualistic faith, dominant in those days, which prevented believers from actively participating in the transformation of the social reality. For Arce the only way to know and worship God is to get involved in the particularity of the historical context; this is where God’s creative and redemptive purposes are revealed.\textsuperscript{28} One year after, reflecting on the nature and mission of the church, he repeated the challenge to the church: it “will have to be immersed in the world, sharing in its problems and agonies, in the spirit in which Christ shared them, and serving the world in its needs.”\textsuperscript{29} Consistent with his Reformed tradition, he added: “It is precisely... in what the church has as secular where what is most sacred about the church is manifest, its most sacred testimony, its most spiritual destiny to be the body of Christ... and serving the world.”\textsuperscript{30}

1965 marked a milestone in his theological itinerary. He wrote two papers that settled the bases of his theology: “The Mission of the Church in a Socialist Society” and “Fundamentos bíblicos para una antropología” (Biblical Foundations for an Anthropology). The first one was very controversial, but also became programmatic for the Cuban ecumenical movement. This piece constituted his first systematic attempt to reflect upon the Cuban revolution, and to rethink the mission of the church in this context. Arce warned against the church adopting a “docetic” stand. As he claimed, “[t ]he serious threat facing the church at all times, but particularly in

\textsuperscript{30}Ibid.
revolutionary times such as these ..., times of specific divine activity, is the danger of falling into the clutches of ‘fear,’ and trying to become disincarnate.” If it succumbed to that temptation, the church would be exercising its dimisión (de-missioning) rather than its misión (co-mission). By 1961 the revolutionary process in Cuba had already been declared Marxist-Leninist by Fidel Castro. For Arce the revolutionary process embodied a divine calling to the church: it meant the incarnation of the church in that context, the church’s acknowledgment of its historical circumstances as a “Marxist-Leninist” revolution, and the concrete participation in “the construction of socialism ninety miles from imperialism in a recently liberated colony.” In his view, re-centering his theology and the mission of the church within the revolutionary process, the mission of the church consisted in providing an evangelizing prophetic testimony to society of God’s creative, redeeming, and reconciling activity in the world. In this light, he concluded that the Cuban revolution was a particular historical expression of God’s activity.

In Arce’s view, the goal of Christian witness is to glorify God, which concretely means to serve human beings. Glorifying God and humanizing human beings—“saving them...as divine creatures and as the culmination of God’s creative activity”—are one and the same thing. Yet, for him this was not an abstract theological statement; it implied action to achieve concrete socio-economic goals in a particular historical situation while facing multiple challenges:

As a church, and as part of our witness, we must have a marked concern for ensuring the greatest welfare for the largest possible number, not as a something abstract, but as a very

31 Arce, “The Mission of the Church in a Socialist Society,” 35. By referring to the content of those divine activities, he asserts: “times such as these are times of divine creativity, and also of redemption. They are, in addition, times of judgment and reconciliation, that is, of sanctification” (Arce, “The Mission of the Church in a Socialist Society,” 35).
32 Ibid., 34.
33 Ibid., 35. He adds, “(t)his activity will always be explosive, innovative, and revolutionary, because it is an activity with retrieves ‘something’ from ‘nothing,’ and which selects what ‘is not’ to undo what ‘is’” (Arce, “The Mission of the Church in a Socialist Society,” 35).
concrete thing, in the environment and in the situation and time wherein we are fated to live; particularly with the resources which God has put in our hands on the island, on this day, with a blockade, inclement weather, stupidity on the part of some, indifference among others, or more or less concealed sabotage by still others.\(^{35}\)

For Arce, the Cuban church had a unique opportunity to exercise its mission in a society “that claims to be concerned, and is concerned, with the creation of a complete human being, a new person, with the humanization of the person, and with liberation from all alienation, including moral and spiritual alienation.”\(^{36}\) He understood that Christian testimony in a socialist society was closely related to the collectivist manner in which material and spiritual goods are produced, distributed and consumed. “The believer and the church must be vitally interested in having society produce its material goods in such a way that each person will receive the equitable share that belongs to each of that bread which belongs to everyone.”\(^{37}\) For him, this is the only way in which the prayer: “Our Father...give us this day our daily bread,” finds its true meaning. When praying and working, the believer neither prays nor works for his/her own bread, but prays and works for “our bread,” “the bread on which we have put our creative hands, bread which we can legitimately call ‘ours’.”\(^{38}\)

This understanding draws attention to two interconnected themes in Arce’s theological proposal: 1) work is an anthropological category to express the personal spiritual realization and humanity’s social eschatological orientation (its “social destiny”);\(^{39}\) and 2) the capitalist system of production and distribution of goods constitutes a denial of the spiritual fulfillment and social

\(^{35}\)Ibid., 39.
\(^{36}\)Ibid., 38.
\(^{37}\)Ibid., 38–39.
\(^{38}\)Arce, “The Mission of the Church in a Socialist Society,” 38. In such a sense, he argued, “[m]aterial goods kept selfishly for our own exclusive gain not only distort the social nature of the goods, which are divine means of shedding his providential grace on all, but also preclude Christian witness” (Arce, “The Mission of the Church in a Socialist Society,” 39).
\(^{39}\)On this issue, he claims that “for Christians work is an expression of the communitarian destiny of humanity, of the organic unity of the individual in society, of the communitarian condition of human beings, of their social being as well as social destiny. That human solidarity must serve as the purpose for human work. In the New Testament, it is called koinonia” (Arce, “The Mission of the Church in a Socialist Society,” 44).
destiny of humanity. In emphasizing the spiritual meaning of collective “work” in a socialist society, Arce was echoing other voices calling for the need of increasing the production of goods to overcome the economic crisis and tremendous scarcity during the 1960s. This notion coincided with the government’s development of an increasingly moral discourse in the early 1970s to stimulate productivity of workers.\(^{40}\) Much of the rhetoric in the revolutionary process targeted the sense of satisfaction for the fulfillment of personal duty and work, the collaboration toward the building of a common good instead of emphasizing wage earning.\(^{41}\) In theological terms, Arce pointed to the church’s prophetic testimony to society. While Christians and Marxists may share the same positive attitude toward work as a creative and integrating activity, the Christian’s attitude goes beyond the Marxist view: “to the Christian this is fulfillment not only of human spirituality, but also of the divine ‘task’.”\(^{42}\) “The Christian, in the work center, works for the purpose of cooperating with God in the integration of humankind into the kingdom.”\(^{43}\) Coinciding with narrow understandings of capitalism that emphasize individualism and profit making, he insisted that the church must realize and proclaim that this cooperation is not possible in the capitalist system of production and distribution of wealth: “Capitalism, with its materialist concept of work as a mere commodity, is the most anti-Christian thing imaginable... The time for the divine judgment on the dehumanizing capitalist ‘work-goods-wages’ relationship has come.”\(^{44}\)

It is in this sense that the church “discovers” the iconoclastic character of its mission, which implies the “de-ideologization” of the church itself. “So long as the Cuban church believes in the capitalist idols, and adores them, and believes in ‘free enterprise’ or the ‘American way of

\(^{40}\)Sergio Arce Martínez, “Itinerario teológico,” 119.
\(^{43}\)Ibid., 44.
\(^{44}\)Ibid., 43.
life,’ it cannot give its witness prophetically.”

Hence he highlighted the relevance of “Marxism” as a de-mythologyzing and anti-idolatrous instrument that prophetically confronts the capitalist political, social, economic, and philosophical idols, namely the bourgeois concepts of liberty, division of classes, private property, and the god of idealism. He found in “Marxist philosophical atheism” a useful and legitimate tool to unmask and question theologically the “practical atheism” of the church. In the last analysis, the evangelizing task of the church is a process that must first occur internally in the church, by renouncing its idols and privileges in society. Only then the church will be able to speak prophetically.

In “Fundamentos bíblicos para una antropología,” his aim was to underline the anthropological commonalities between Christianity and Marxism in order to overcome mutual misconceptions and distrust between revolutionary Christians and Marxists. He rejected the metaphysical and dualistic nature of Greek philosophy. He thought that central to early Christianity and Marxism was the Hebrew-biblical thought, which employs dynamic and dialectic “categories” to refer to nature, history, and humans in their relation to God. “There is nothing more foreign to biblical thought than conceiving humans in the ‘abstract,’ as ‘individuals,’ not only outside of their natural world but also of their social world.”

Arce argued that there are no irreconcilable contradictions between “the Marxist” philosophical and sociological understanding of the world, history, and human nature, and the

45Ibid., 46.
46According to Arce, “Marxism is more tractable instrument in the hands of God for carrying out the will of God in contemporary history than is the Church itself.” He added, “God speaks to us through Marxism, calling us to the task of renewing ourselves in the ethical and social realm, and also in the ideological and theological realm” (Arce, “The Mission of the Church in a Socialist Society,” 46–47).
48Sergio Arce, “Fundamentos bíblicos para una antropología,” in La teología como desafío (La Habana, Cuba: Consejo Ecuménico de Cuba, 1980), 6–16. Arce presented this paper at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Havana. He seemed to be convinced that the solution for the encounter between “Marxism-apparently atheistic-and Christianity-apparently theistic-will be... a decisive factor in the development of the Latin American revolutionary movement” (Arce, “Fundamentos bíblicos para una antropología,” 7).
biblical perspective. Christians can find in the Bible similar insights concerning the material world, history, and human beings as a socio-psycho-somatic unity; these insights should help Christians reject the disintegration or dichotomization (of reality) in terms of nature-grace, sacred history-secular history, world-church, individual-society, matter-spirit, and body-soul. In recognizing the *analogia relationis* implied in the biblical concept of humanity as being created in the image of God, Christians are in the position to assume their social origin, character, and destiny as God’s co-workers and co-creators. The anthropological complement that Marxism needs, he argued, cannot be sought in the individualistic approach of philosophical existentialism, as Sartre suggested. Instead, it has to be found in the dialectical biblical anthropology that emphasizes both the social origin and nature of humanity, and its social or communitarian eschatological destiny. “Such destiny seems to be truncated, unrealizable... if we introduce into Marxist theorizing, as an ‘idealist methodology’ a dogmatic atheist principle of immanentism.”

1967 was a key year for the Cuban Presbyterian Church; due to the political climate in the island and economic difficulties resulting from the embargo, and other factors, church leaders in Cuba chose to become institutionally independent, separate from the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. This momentous step involved numerous challenges for its members and leaders. Some church leaders, like Arce, thought that the Cuban church had to reconfigure its structure, programs and ministries, financial resources, and theological views in order to orientate its mission in accordance with the new circumstances. In order to respond to the new climate and to arrest the rapid shrinking of the church (due to migration and to people’s exiting the church and joining the revolutionary process), evangelization became a central concern, in theological

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50 Ibid., 11–15.
51 Ibid., 15.
discussions within the Presbyterian Church and within the ecumenical movement more generally. At a preparatory meeting for the Second National Assembly of the Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Cuba in 1968, Arce provided some theological clues for rethinking evangelization as the center of the church’s mission at that historical juncture. He opposed traditional understanding of evangelization in terms of proselytism, and instead insisted that “the church is called upon to be a church in the world, and not to try to convert the world into a church.”

He understood evangelization as a task of the church directed primarily to itself, and only as an indirect task in relation to the world outside the church. Evangelization begins when the church confronts itself with Jesus Christ and discovers that “the life that is Christ lives in the world, without its consent or ours, as a dynamic reality and not as a formal ‘institutionalization’ of the ecclesiastical type.” Appropriately understood, he encouraged the church to recognize the Christ-like character of the Cuban revolution, while actively and constructively participating in it.

In his opinion, this was the way in which Cuban Christians must follow Jesus Christ.

2.1969-1978: Formalizing Theology in Revolution

In 1969 Arce was appointed rector of the Seminario Evangélico de Teología at Matanzas. This event marked decisively his theological itinerary. From this point in time, and during the decade of the 1970s, his theological production increased and reached greater depth. He wrote and published a significant numbers of essays, lectures, and sermons. His multiple pastoral, academic, and ecumenical executive responsibilities allowed him to elaborate further some insights which he had previously dealt with, and to work on new topics in conversation with

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53Ibid., 56.
54Ibid., 60.
55For a detailed summary of economic efforts and social programs developed by the revolution during the 1960s, see Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, 272–76.
other theological voices inside Cuba and abroad. Engaged in this process of reflection and dialogue, he formulated the first expressions of “theology in revolution” as he interpreted diverse social processes in Cuba, Latin America, and beyond.

Arce drew a close connection between theological education and the present and future situation of the Cuban church. He was aware that responding to present and future challenges would “depend greatly on the way (in which church leaders are) able to get a wide biblical-theological education and create a serious Cuban theology that is adequate to our specific situation.” Hence he engaged in the promotion of such theological education for pastors and lay persons through Matanzas’s Seminary and the programs of the Studies Centre of the CCEC. For him, it was crucial for Christians to have appropriate biblical, theological, and socio-analytical instruments “to understand the revolutionary phenomenon..., reinterpreting it in such a way that the church can find its place within the structure of the new society.” Thus, the elaboration of a Cuban theology for a Cuban church in a revolutionary context became his priority. He was convinced that only in this way could the church free itself of its still dominant North Atlantic abstract and alien theological views.

In attempting to fulfill this aim, Arce started to reflect more specifically on methodological questions such as the locus, addressees, scope of the Cuban theological reflection, its sources, and hermeneutics. As a response to European and North American articulations of the “theology of the revolution,” he wrote in the same year (1969) a paper titled

57 For a detailed historical recount of Cuba’s situation during the 1970s from sociopolitical, economic, and cultural perspectives, see Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, 265–90.
59 Ibid., 168–69.
“Is a Theology of the Revolution Possible?”
There, he dismissed the idea that it is possible to do theology of the revolution as European scholars pretended. The church can only do theology indirectly; that is, the church’s primarily concern is to reflect upon the church as actively involved in the revolutionary process. As a theologian, he did not speak for the revolutionary who is not Christian but “for the Christian revolutionary who plays an active part in the church of Christ in this our country which is socialist.”

Arce seemed to reject the idea of the revolution as object of study, that is, as a primary object of theological interpretation, especially when this interpretation is done from outside of a revolutionary context. “Only indirectly ... does theology have anything to say to the non-Christian revolutionary,” and this is because, “in the case of Cuba, the church ... ‘theologizes’ in the midst of a society in full revolution.” To do theology in this specific context means “to analyze critically, in the most objective way possible within theological-biblical Christian suppositions, the witness of the church in the midst of the first socialist-revolutionary society in the American hemisphere.” The non-Christian revolutionary does not need theology to be a (better) revolutionary. As for the revolutionary Christian, this theological approach becomes necessary in order to be a better Christian within the revolution.

Revolutionaries did not need a Christian theory of the revolution; what the revolutionaries needed, be they Christian or otherwise, is an appropriate sociopolitical theory—not disconnected from praxis but built from within praxis; in his case what was needed was a “Marxist-Leninist theory” that helped them in the process of building the new society.

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60 Arce, “Is a Theology of the Revolution Possible?”
61 Ibid., 193–94.
62 Ibid., 194.
63 Arce, “Is a Theology of the Revolution Possible?” 196. As can be seen, there are obvious similarities and differences between Latin American liberation theologians’ “classic” formulation of the theological task and his understanding of it, as a critical reflection upon the witness of the church in a specific context, in this case a Marxist-Leninist revolution, in light of the Biblical testimony.
64 Arce, “Is a Theology of the Revolution Possible?” 214.
On the other hand, the circularity inherent in the theological hermeneutical exercise requires the theologian to reflect on the church’s witness as part of a “society in revolution” and on what the revolution means in God’s economy. Arce developed some of these insights in *Hacia una teología de la liberación*, a booklet he wrote in 1969 and which served to inaugurate the “Camilo Torres” Annual Conferences in 1971. According to Leonardo Boff, this treatise is one of the first reflections in Latin America on the Trinity from a contextual posture. Here, Arce interpreted the Cuban revolutionary process in Trinitarian theological terms. His main thesis was that, “revolution” is the method that God the Creator, Liberator, Reconciler employs to create, redeem, and reconcile/integrate nature, society and human consciousness. To Arce, every revolutionary moment in society that seeks the integral liberation of individuals and their reconciliation (with themselves, with their fellow humans, and with nature) as new creatures is a concrete manifestation of God’s creative, liberating, and reconciling/integrating activity. Insofar as Christians realize the profound socio-political implications of this theological interpretation, the Trinity is no longer for them an abstract and inscrutable theological doctrine. It is a fundamental theological inspiration for their commitment with the revolutionary project. Drawing on the example of Cuba, Arce argued that the revolutionary situation at the time demanded the elimination of capitalist economic exploitative relations. He conceived the

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65 Ibid., 196–97.
69 Ibid., 54.
70 Ibid., 62.
historical project of liberation as the establishment of a socialist revolution that includes, as a central element, the formation of a “new human being.”

Arce amplified this view in his 1971 lecture at the Seminario Católico San Carlos in Havana. Reflecting on the then newly emerged “Latin American liberation theology,” he revisited his earlier position on the “theology of revolution.” He stated that the attempts at constructing a theology of revolution could only be justified if articulated in terms of a theology of liberation: as “a critical reflection upon the loving and consequential action of an actualized faith.” Although sometimes ambiguous about the extent of his critical position, Arce rejected the Eurocentric content in notions of revolution and its “developmentalist” implications for “underdeveloped” countries. And instead, he proposed that only reflecting seriously on liberation “a lo cubano” (which implied a Marxist-Leninist revolution that sought to create “a new humanity (as part of) a new society”) can theology attain a meaningful sense for “an underdeveloped world that has said: ‘enough is enough’ and has started to move forward...” And he remarked:

Latin America has been oppressed, enslaved, and conquered culturally and religiously. Therefore, it has no other option in the contemporary theological task than the theology of the Revolution within its specificity, more than justified but a demand to be a theology of liberation.

With this essay Arce showed that the scope of his theology was not limited to local questions, like how to be “church in revolution” in the socialist Cuba. Without losing its contextual specificity, he established connections with other Latin Americans reflecting on their own social contexts and struggles, and with similar theological approaches despite their evident

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71Ibid., 62–78.
73Ibid., 19–20.
74Ibid., 23–24.
contextual differences. His message to the Christian for Socialism Meeting in Santiago de Chile in 1972 demonstrated the broader perspective and scope that his theology had reached when compared to its earlier expressions.75

During the first half of the 1970s, Arce’s theological and pastoral concerns with the formation of the “new humanity” in a “new church” for a “new society” led him to reflect on diverse but interconnected topics concerning ecumenism, soteriology, ecclesiology, theological education, and the relation between theology and culture.76 In articulating these reflections, he was responding to specific challenges that the Cuban church and ecumenical movement were facing locally, but he was also paying attention to the complex international struggles that peoples from Latin America, Africa, and Asia were facing as they fought for their political, economic, and cultural liberation.77 In the case of the local challenges, it is important to mention the difficulty in replacing the “old” religious ideological framework still dominant in many churches, which they inherited from U.S. missionaries. He viewed it as a big obstacle for many Christians to understand the radically liberating and potentially transforming character of the “Marxist-Leninist revolution” in its Cuban version, and to fully integrate themselves into it. On the other hand, Christians and other religious groups suffered the heightening of

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sociopolitical/ideological discrimination within the revolutionary process.78 This was partly due to anti-religious ideological views and “secularist” prejudices, and in part as a result of the state’s adopting a so-called “scientific atheism” as official ideology. In Arce’s opinion, these “ortodoxismos” (fundamentalist positions) contributed significantly to mutual misunderstandings and mistrusts among Christians and non-religious revolutionaries.79 Many Christians excluded themselves from the process while others felt marginalized from it.

As an endeavor to overcome such ortodoxismos, in the mid-1970s he wrote three essays that deserve mention here, which had a profound impact on some Cuban ecumenical sectors: “Cristo y la liberación social” (Christ and Social Liberation), “Theology and Contemporary Atheism,” and “Christian Faith and Ideology.” These writings are key moments to appreciate Arce’s theological trajectory. Here, he systematized previous methodological insights and theological interpretations of the revolution, and articulated a clearer and sharper revolutionary theological approach for the Cuban reality and for the global context of oppression/liberation.

With the first paper he intended to show the holistic liberating character of the Gospel when interpreted in light of the historical practice and teachings of Jesus Christ. He highlighted the relevance of the Christian witness for the process of creating a new humanity, as an integral part of the liberation embodied in and sought by the revolution.80 In “Theology and Contemporary Atheism,” he condemned the notion of a self-named “scientific atheism,” by presenting it as a metaphysical negation of religion. He argued that atheism is a human phenomenon that must be dialectically understood from a historical perspective. Atheism is a historical and cultural phenomenon that correlates dialectically to the history of religion, which

78Juana Berges and Reinerio Arce, eds., 40 años de testimonio evangélico en Cuba (La Habana, Cuba: Consejo de Iglesias de Cuba, 2000).
80Arce, “Cristo y la liberación social.”
must be understood as a history of “theism.” “The negation of God in contemporary [philosophical] atheism has essentially meant the rejection of a god whose existence is claimed to be another idea and, at best, the only idea.”81 “In this sense, atheism is not related to the living God, but rather to a ‘conceptual idol’.”82 In Arce’s view, there are parallels between the history of atheism, understood as “the history of the critique of religion,” and the biblical revelation as a history of the critique of idolatry.83 For him, this is true atheism, the true negation of God: “the atheism of injustice, of the one who says in his ‘heart’: ‘there is no God.’ It is the atheism of imperialist capitalism.”84

By making the distinction between these two types of atheisms implied in the Marxist-Leninist ideological framework and in the bourgeois religious ideology, he affirmed that Christians are in the position of re-ideologizing their faith. This was his main point in “Christian Faith and Ideology.” The question is not whether Christian faith should identify itself with a specific ideology, because it always does identify with some ideology. The issue is whether Christians are aware of it or not. Resonating with the work of Juan Luis Segundo in his Liberation of Theology (but without mentioning him), he added that the problem for Christians is to determine with which ideology—understood as an “idea-force” system that pervades the structure of a society and mobilizes the class interest of its adherents—they must identify.85 The task of theology as an ideological theoretical critique of the church’s religious-political ideology is to help Christians to make that option a possibility. To do so, they have to examine the church’s practice in light of Christian faith’s demands, in terms of “hope of justice” and concrete

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82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., 112.
84 Ibid., 103.
“love” in solidarity with those suffering exploitation and oppression, and with those who march at the front lines of the struggle. Therefore, an appropriate liberating and revolutionary theology must focus “on religion in a concrete, historical manner, so as to determine which class interests it serves... whether it serves the revolutionary interests of the proletarian class, or the conservative, reactionary interests of the bourgeoisie.” In light of this, Arce made the strong case for the construction of socialism and the adoption of the “Marxist-Leninist” political ideology as “the only genuinely Christian option for the person of faith at this time in this world and this homeland.” Hence he insisted on “a systematization of religious ideology attuned to the revolutionary commitment demanded by faith,” as a central element of the articulation of liberationist and revolutionary theologies for Latin America.

In articulating this perspective, Arce criticized the ideological-methodological approach overall used by many liberation theologians. He argued that, while denouncing the political oppression and economic exploitation in Latin America and demonstrating the contradictions between that situation and the demands of faith, many liberation scholars did not seriously reflect on the historical concrete expressions that the liberating praxis would take to overcome and transform the oppressive reality in the continent. In that sense, he thought, these liberation theologians need to recognize not only the relevance of the Marxist-Leninist social theories as analytical frameworks, but also their proven effectiveness, specifically in Cuba’s case, for the transition from “capitalism” to “socialism.” Moreover, elsewhere he asserted that the “content of the theology of liberation, if it is really intended to be one of liberation, must be founded upon the struggle of liberation, and would have to be based on the Cuban revolutionary experience,” which, he judged was—without acknowledging the many factors and accidents that conspired to

86Ibid., 126.
87Ibid., 134.
88Ibid., 130.
make this happen—at that time, the only successful experience of liberation from capitalism and imperialism in Latin America.\(^89\)

An important moment in Arce’s theological itinerary concerned his substantial contribution to the elaboration of the Confession of Faith of 1977 of the Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Cuba.\(^90\) The Confession was the result of the work of a special committee, group discussions in congregations, and final approval by the General Assembly. Arce took the lead in formulating its theological tenets and general outlines, writing some sections in their entirety, and editing the final version.\(^91\) An analysis of the content and significance of this historic theological document goes beyond the scope of this brief account. Suffice it to say that, the Confession was critically studied and appreciated in numerous churches and by theologians (mostly from the Reformed tradition) in Cuba and abroad.\(^92\) So, as far as Arce’s theological thought is concerned, the Confession reflected in a systematic and contextual way his theological view of humans as God’s creatures, Jesus Christ’s little siblings, and ecónomos (oikonomoi) of Creation, and humanity’s role in the salvific and integrating historical process of socio-cultural, economic, political, ecological, and spiritual reconstruction of humanity.

3. **1979-1989: Consolidation of the Theology in Revolution**

During this period Cubans accomplished noticeable socioeconomic and political achievements, and also confronted deep domestic and international challenges. The economic situation improved considerably during this decade due to diversification of industrial production, investments and exports growth, and substitution of imports mainly from capitalist

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\(^{89}\) Arce, “Camilo Torres and the Liberation of Theology,” 135. See also his intervention at the well-known Encounter of Theologians in Mexico City in 1977, in Pixley and Bastián, eds., *Praxis cristiana y producción teológica*, 48.


countries. The government increased material incentives as a strategy to raise productivity. As Pérez notes, the sustained support and subsidies from the Soviet Union and other eastern European socialist countries were also major factors in the Cuban achievements during these years, particularly in education and health services.\footnote{Pérez, \textit{Cuba between Reform and Revolution}, 270–72.} The Soviet Union consolidated its position as Cuba’s main trade partner and creditor. On one hand, Cuba’s strong economic links to the Socialist bloc and to the Soviet Union in particular allowed the revolutionary government to advance its most ambitious socioeconomic programs, and to strengthen its military capacity. On the other hand, the economic-political independence of the Cuban revolutionary project became significantly compromised, to the point of jeopardizing its survival when the Soviet Union and Socialist bloc collapsed in 1989. There were political costs too. In particular, by the beginning of the 1980s, Cuba’s political indebtedness to the Soviet Union became evident; Soviet officials pressured the Cuban government to support the former’s invasion of Afghanistan, thereby damaging the government’s credibility and its reputation among some Cubans and within the Nonaligned Movement.\footnote{Ibid., 289.}

Yet, throughout this decade, the symbol of the “Cuban revolution” continued to play an inspirational and supportive role among liberation movements in Central America and Africa, particularly in Angola. With the beginning of the Ronald Reagan’s administration in 1981, the U.S. government intensified its political and military presence in both regions, but especially in Central America and the Caribbean. The triumph of the Nicaraguan revolution in 1979, the increasing activity of opposition movements in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, and the emergence of nationalistic governments in Panama and Grenada were interpreted by the U.S. administration as strong threats to the interests of the U.S. in the region. The Reagan
administration greatly distorted the character of these movements, and interpreted them, and Cuba’s active involvement with them, as a menace threatening the area and the hemisphere. These and many other issues contributed to the increasing tensions in the economic and diplomatic relationships between the U.S. and Cuba. The U.S. government intensified efforts to economically and diplomatically isolate Cuba through reinforcing the embargo and imposing sanctions in international forums and organizations. For its part, Cuba’s government deepened and broadened locally and abroad its anti-imperialist discourse. In order to remain connected to other movements and countries in their struggle for liberation, Cuba’s government also increased its solidarity and military support in various ways to Third World countries. 95

Two main characteristics of Arce’s theological work at this time were: one, the consolidation of his theological thought as “theology in revolution;” and two, the broadening of the scope of his theological reflection by becoming more intentionally global. This decade represented a new phase of the dialogue between Arce and other Latin American, and African American liberation theologians, and “political” theologians from Europe and North America. In particular, these expanding dialogues occurred at events like the Encounter of Theologies in Mexico, 1977. That event marked the (re)encounter of some liberation scholars with Sergio Arce’s Cuban theology. 96 This meeting was also an opportunity to establish the dialogue between Moltmann and Latin American liberation theologians, provoked by his “Open Letter to José Míguez Bonino.” 97 Although the dialogue did not resolve the tensions among Moltmann, James Cone and other liberation theologians, the meeting marked the beginning of a process of cross-fertilization and mutual learning among European political theologians, African American

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liberation theologians, Latin American liberation theologians, and women and feminist theologians. Arce’s critical views of some Latin American liberation theologians’ methodological approaches remained; but he also acknowledged their points of contact and promising common perspectives.

These debates created important avenues of dialogue between Arce and other liberation theologians. He noted similar views in terms of commitment, in doing theology, to liberation from oppression and dependency in Latin America. For example, he drew on Assmann’s articulation of the identification of Christians with popular struggles concerning the fundamental rights to life as the methodological core of liberation theology. In this light, Arce stated that “[t]he best of [liberation theology] does not depart from a supposed liberation, but from a real oppression within which [people] struggle for liberation. It is about a theology based on the struggles for liberation.” He saw the emerging Nicaraguan revolution as a crucial point for the development of a “liberation theology” that assumes as part of its task reflecting on every aspect of the liberating struggle, namely, its pre-revolutionary stage and, more importantly, the phase of

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100 Arce, “Teología cubana: teología en Revolución,” 75.

101 Ibid.
constructing a socialist society. In reflecting on his earlier theological itinerary Arce defined his theological proposal as “theology in Revolution,” for the first time in 1979.

Arce now characterized “theology in Revolution” basically as a critical reflection on the liberating praxis of faith of the church incarnated in a people of freed “workers” who see each other as compañeros, comrades, and co-creators—along with the “Eternal Worker”—of a new society. To do theology in revolution implied adopting a partisan stance, because “the class option is a primary requirement of Christian discipleship.” It required making an option for the “class” to which Jesus belonged and served preferentially, the same class which has consciousness of class “en sí” y “para sí,” (in itself and for itself), and which has currently taken over the power and carries out the “revolution”. Doing theology in revolution is, therefore, a commitment to the struggle for every just cause in the world, because it is only through just relationships between individuals and nations that peace will at last be real. “When the risen Christ offers us his peace, he invites us to struggle for the implantation of a new world of justice.”

Arce further expanded these ideas in dialogue with others from around the world, for example, in August, 1981, in the Assembly of the WSCF, in San Francisco, California. Taking seriously the global context of increasing poverty, political repression, and social oppression, and facing the threat of a nuclear conflagration, he asserted that the main responsibility of Christians for the “democratic transformation of society” must be an unconditional commitment to the struggles of those whom in the Bible are generically called “the poor.” No other criterion than

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102 Ibid.
104 Ibid., 18.
105 Ibid.
their poverty should mediate that commitment.\textsuperscript{106} As he reasoned, in the efforts toward world peace through distributive justice among individuals, peoples, and nations, the very survival of humanity is at stake: “Do we save the poor of their poverty or do we all perish? Do we achieve a greater justice or will we have to suffer a war that will destroy us all in absolute terms?”\textsuperscript{107}

Arce insisted on the urgency to clarify the meaning and implications of the struggle for liberation. As one can infer, he thought that many liberation theologians were trapped in contradiction. As he saw it, the neglect of the Cuban revolutionary process in their theological reflections, and the absence of dialogue with the theology articulated by Cubans from that context, implied that for these theologians the commitment to the struggle for liberation ended once the poor triumph and take political control and power.\textsuperscript{108} Most liberation theologians did not have a concrete historical project that will result in the taking of power. As he understood it, for these theologians “the taking of power [was] a kind of ‘betrayal’ of the very struggle, of poverty itself. In this case, poverty [would be] elevated to a divine category, and [would be] absolutized and sacralized.”\textsuperscript{109} The limitations of Arce’s evaluation of other liberation theologians in terms of differences of contexts, and social and political conditions will be discussed later in chapter five.

Arce’s reaction to other liberation theologians corresponded to their apparent lack of solidarity with socialist societies and with the Cuban revolutionary process in particular and, in some cases, to criticism and condemnation by some progressive Christians and liberation theologians from capitalist societies. He insisted that Christians concerned with the elaboration of theological reflections relevant to the 1980s must seriously consider the revolutionary triumph

\textsuperscript{106} Arce, “Fe cristiana y responsabilidad social en los años ochenta,” 112–16.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 118.
\textsuperscript{108} Arce, “Fe cristiana y responsabilidad social,” 118-120
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
of popular movements around the world such as Nicaragua (1979). As a result, in Arce’s view, these theological approaches had to face the changing landscape. The intention was not to elaborate a “new” political theology. Instead, the decade of the 1980s required the articulation of a political-economic theology based on a transforming political-economic praxis.\footnote{Ibid., 126.}

Two other topics captured Arce’s attention during this period: the U.S. economic blockade against Cuba; and the debate on human rights and democracy. At an encounter between Cuban and U.S. theologians in Havana (1985), he condemned the anti-Gospel (evil) character of the embargo. As he saw it, it effectively denies God. There is nothing more anti-fraternal, anti-human, anti-Christian, and anti-solidarity than the embargo. It was conceived “with the purpose of sowing suffering, sickness and death, if we do not accept to renounce our dignity and decorum as a nation of free human beings.”\footnote{Sergio Arce, “The ‘Embargo’ of the U.S.: A Cuban Approach from the Point of View of the Theology in Revolution,” in Gottes Zukunft-Zukunft der Welt. Festschrift Für Jürgen Moltmann Zum 60. Geburtstag, ed. Herman Deuser, Gerhard Marcel Martin, Konrad Stock, and Michael Welker (Munich, Germany: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1986), 396.} He argued that the embargo is obviously a negation of the Christian faith in a common Father, who is primarily revealed in the Bible as the God of the poor, the weak, the oppressed, and of those who suffer prosecution for seeking justice.\footnote{Arce, “El bloqueo de Estados Unidos contra Cuba,” 73.} The embargo also denies the faith in Jesus Christ, our “Elder brother,” the “Poor,” the “Weak,” the “Repressed,” who was prosecuted, tortured, and assassinated for seeking justice, the cause of human liberation. “While Jesus Christ asked his disciples to feed the hungry multitudes, the ‘embargo’ was designed to prevent the economic development of Cuba, the kind of development which would permit us create life and ‘life in abundance’ for our country.”\footnote{Arce, “The ‘Embargo’ of the U.S.: A Cuban Approach from the Point of View of the Theology in Revolution,” 400.} Designed to isolate “Cuba from the rest of the American continent and if possible from the rest of the world,” the embargo constitutes a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, “the Giver of Life and Producer of
Solidarity.” For him, the anti-life character of the “embargo” is a concrete expression of the necrophilia of the imperialist-capitalist system.

Concerning the debates on human rights and democracy, Arce forged a radical position: “the rights of the poor, dehumanized in their poverty, are the only biblical and theological criteria to be used in deciding when and where human rights have been violated.” Any discussion on this subject matter from a biblical-theological perspective must be understood in light of the right of the poor, exploited and oppressed to be freed from their condition. The rights of the poor cannot be seen as separated from “God’s right to be God of the poor, the exploited and oppressed, to be a God liberating from poverty.” More specifically, Arce considered that the fundamental human right is the right to work. Through work that is not alienating, humans have the possibility of participating as co-creators and co-integrators in God’s historical project of life, peace, abundance, and freedom. For him, it is in this sense that democracy must be understood and constructed, including workplace democracy: “every person’s participation in the production, distribution, and use of all material and spiritual wealth” must be guaranteed. Nevertheless, Arce’s notion of “work” does not entirely resolve issues on decision-making concerning the organization and management of work, and of workplaces, and of policy-making at every level more generally.

4. 1990-1999: Re-contextualization of Theology in Revolution

The 1990s brought an unexpected sociopolitical and economic downturn for Cuba. With the fall of the Berlin’ Wall, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the collapse of the

\[114\] Ibid., 396.
\[116\] Ibid., 54.
\[117\] Ibid., 59.
Socialist Bloc, Cuba suddenly lost its main political allies and ideological “referents,” its main trading partners and strategic resources suppliers.118 This situation found most Cubans unprepared to face a crisis that, overnight, threatened to ruin thirty-five years of social gains and construction of an alternative path to economic development. The government was also unprepared to confront the enormous challenges in adjusting to the unstable and unjust trade conditions of the international market. In a desperate effort to contain the devastating effects of the crisis, the government announced in the summer of 1990 a series of austerity and rationing measures, earlier designed for times of war conditions. This contingency plan officially inaugurated the so-called *Período especial en tiempo de paz* (special period in times of peace).

These were very hard years for most Cubans. While accustomed to low consumption levels, most Cubans confronted serious challenges in satisfying their most basic daily needs. As Pérez points out, during these years Cuban society experienced a process of “structural dislocation,” a crisis of “vision” of what could be imagined for a “socialist” Cuba in light of the new circumstances locally and abroad, and other questions and challenges concerning priorities and strategies for forging possible “alternatives.” “Many of the assumptions upon which Cuba had based its economic organizations, developmental strategies, and social programs could no longer be reasonably sustained.”119 The government made enormous efforts to maintain social programs, primarily in the health and education sectors, even though it was severely strained.120 As to the Cuban population, government officials opted for a public rhetoric that combined sacrifice and voluntarism. And as a strategy to overcome the critical situation, they implemented

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118 According to Pérez, “Soviet oil and petroleum by-products, delivered at prices below world market, had accounted for an estimated 90 percent of Cuban energy needs.” (Pérez, *Cuba between Reform and Revolution*, 292).
119 Pérez, *Cuba between Reform and Revolution*, 303.
120 And these commitments bore good fruits; as Pérez notes, Cuba’s infant mortality rates after seven years of the special period in 1997 (7.2 per 1,000) “remained the lowest in Latin America and among the lowest in the world” (Pérez, *Cuba between Reform and Revolution*, 296).
economic reforms oriented at generating new sources of income and foreign exchange in industry, agriculture, and tourism. A set of controversial economic measures were put in place: decriminalization of the circulation of U.S. dollar, legalization of self-employment in specific areas, and opening of Cuban economy to foreign investments through the creation of joint enterprises with the state. While recognizing that these reforms contradicted ideological tenets of the “revolution,” the leaders of the country viewed them as necessary measures to “save” the revolutionary project. Through these pragmatic measures, government officials sought to renegotiate Cuba’s position in global markets but without adopting the neoliberal economic policies of structural adjustment, and thus, they insisted, without substantially compromising the nature of the sociopolitical project.

At this historical juncture, religion became a key factor. During the special period, religious awakenings swept across the nation. While conditioned by multiple factors, which deserve explanation from various vantage points (economy, politics, sociology, etc.), many Cubans participated in religious revivals reflecting the overall situation of frustration, anxiety, uncertainty, and loss of spiritual meaning/ideological referent brought about by the crisis. All religious expressions and Christian denominations experienced a quick and dramatic increase in terms of new proselytes participating in their religious activities and liturgical celebrations. As some authors have pointed out, the churches were not sufficiently prepared for the crisis either, or the sudden appearance of many people seeking meaning and consolation in tumultuous time,

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121 Marifeli Pérez-Stable, ed., Looking Forward: Comparative Perspectives on Cuba’s Transition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 2–3.
122 Pérez quotes Fidel Castro’s speech on July 23, 1993: “Today we cannot speak of the pure, ideal, perfect socialism of which we dream because life forces us into concessions... Now life, reality, and the dramatic situation the world is experiencing... oblige us to do what we would never have done otherwise if we had the capital and the technology to do so.” And also, “Who would have thought that we, so doctrinaire, we who fought foreign investment, would one day view foreign investment as an urgent need?” (Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, 305–07).
from a variety of cultural, ideological, and even religious backgrounds, and with different expectations and concerns.  

The religious awakening of the 1990s meant for the institutional and less “formal” religious organizations and expressions great opportunities to grow in terms of membership and social relevance. The established organizations were also impacted; the revival provoked intense and contested debates within them as well, and leading to significant reconfiguration of the doctrinal, liturgical, and organizational structures. As expected, these processes continue today to transform Cuban religious landscapes. Although these processes had been underway for quite some time, indeed at times had provoked serious pressures from the revolutionary government, this new presence of religion in the social sphere introduced new dimensions in the revolutionary process, something which was even welcomed by government officials! They quickly moved to eliminate the earlier discriminatory political, ideological, and administrative norms against religious persons. Although he does not recognize the complexity of the issues and factors involved in these events, Pérez writes: “the state could not but accommodate to the new stirrings of spirituality and encourage creyentes to incorporate themselves into the Communist party and participate more actively in the political process.”

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124 Rafael Cepeda, Elizabeth Carrillo, Rhode González, and Carlos E. Ham, “Causas y desafíos del crecimiento de las iglesias protestantes en Cuba,” in La siembra infinita: Itinerarios de la obra misionera y la evangelización protestante en Cuba, ed. Rafael Cepeda and Carlos R. Molina Rodríguez (Ginebra, Suiza; Matanzas, Cuba; Quito, Ecuador: CMI; SET; CLAI, 2011), 171–94.

125 Various authors, Religión y cambio social: el campo religioso cubano en la década del 90 (La Habana, Cuba: Ciencias Sociales, 2006).

126 In the IV Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba, which was celebrated in 1991, Party members agreed to the elimination of the clauses that prevented people with religious beliefs from becoming members of the party. In the same way, as part of the constitutional reform of 1992, the article that characterized the Cuban State as atheist was removed, and in its place its non-confessional character was affirmed. Discrimination because of religious reasons was frowned-upon, which included obstacles to a person’s service in public office and access to specific university careers because of their religious beliefs. Various Authors, Religión y cambio social, 24.

127 Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, 297.
The entire population of Cuba, including the Party leadership and government officials, faced huge internal and external economic, political, ideological, and social pressures. And somehow, despite everything, Cubans showed an impressive capacity to adapt during the worst moments of the crisis, and sought for the best creative ways to continue the “revolution.” Nevertheless, the Cuban revolutionary process was profoundly and fundamentally transformed and new measures had to be taken to prevent its total downfall. As Pérez asserts, as economic conditions (e.g., access to food, public transportation, etc.) gradually improved, “Cuba emerged from the apocalyptic phase of the período especial during the mid-1990s.” But, in the eyes even of many supporters, these “improvements” involved great sociopolitical costs. The partial ‘dollarization’ of the economy, slight liberalization of some economic sectors, the upsurge of foreign tourism, and underemployment contributed to the emergence/increase in social maladies: prostitution, criminal activities, corruption, black market, marginalization of some sectors, and socioeconomic-racial inequality. Again, many people sought to improve their condition by way of migration. This decade was characterized by constant “legal” and “illegal” emigration, mainly of youth, toward different destinations, particularly the U.S. Today, some of these social behaviors have ceased to be survival strategies and have turned into components of a quite generalized cultural ethos. The emergence of social tensions and problems significantly

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128 Immediately after the downfall of the Soviet Union and the Socialist bloc, the U.S. government intensified its hostile policies against the Cuban people and its government through economic and political sanctions and laws that expanded and sharpened the destructive economic effects of the embargo upon the Cuban people. Through the Torricelli Act (‘Cuba Democracy Act’) and the Helms-Burton Act (‘Cuban Liberty and Democracy Solidarity Act’), enacted under the administrations of George H.W. Bush and William Clinton, respectively, the U.S. provided an extra-territorial scope and a “legal” character to its historical efforts to destroy the Cuban Revolution. See Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, 298–302; Joaquin Roy, Cuba, the United States, and the Helms-Burton Doctrine: International Reactions (Gainesville, FL.: University Press of Florida, 2000).

129 Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, 320.
reconfigured the population’s ‘moral topography,’ and reconfigured the internal perception Cubans had of its complex socioeconomic, political, cultural, and ethnic composition.\(^{130}\)

The shifting global realities of the 1990s and their repercussion in Cuba motivated Arce to revise and re-systematize his theology in order to respond to the social and ecclesial situation now different from the realities of the three previous decades. Along with many other Cubans and like-minded thinkers around the world responding to 1989, he formulated three sets of claims: First, the failure of “historical socialism,” particularly in Eastern Europe did not necessarily imply the triumph of “capitalism” as a model of social development. It also did not mean the non-viability of ‘socialism’ as socioeconomic and political system. Second, with the establishment of a world order subject to the logic of the globalized neo-liberal hegemony of market, the fetishist logic of capitalism became more evidently destructive of nature and inhumane. Third, the Cuban revolutionary project could be “saved” if its reconstruction is primarily understood and engaged as an ethical-spiritual project of nation, and not merely as a political-economic question of cost-benefit relationship.

Arce was conscious of the enormous limitations of other expressions of socialism, particularly the Eastern European versions. As he wrote, it was crucial to understand that “the fall of the Berlin Wall” meant neither the demonstration of the superiority of “capitalism” over “socialism” nor the end of socialism as utopian project to be realized and as alternative to the former. Despite the apparent demise of “socialist” alternatives of this kind, Arce continued his relentless critique of capitalist tendencies and market economies. Drawing on the biblical narrative of Jesus feeding thousands of people (Mk 6.30–44), he emphasized his critique of the capitalist market economy as the negation of the “logic” of the reign of God. He contrasted Jesus’ compassion for people’s hunger and helplessness to the attitude of those who currently

\(^{130}\)Ibid., 295–311.
defend the market economic model that “causes the unnecessary death of more than forty
thousand children every day,... that forces the impoverished peoples of the world to pay a debt
that they have not incurred, and what is worse, to pay it at the cost of their own misery and
death.”

Arce strongly argued against neo-liberal economic doctrines that see in the total freedom
of the market the solution to poverty, underdevelopment, and other social calamities. As he
noted, the logic of the market economy denies “the possibility of...quenching the multiple
hungrers of the crowds.” Despite the debacle experienced by European socialist countries, the
negative impact it has had on Cuban society, and the crises among progressive and revolutionary
movements around the world, he continued to insist that a socioeconomic configuration based on
social equity and distributive justice resonates with “the economic practice of the reign of God,”
as exemplified by Jesus’ action and teachings on this gospel story, and as lived by the early
Christians (Acts 2.44-45; 4.32, 34-35). Along with many others, he rejected dominant notions
of the end of utopias and alternatives to capitalism because of the disastrous crisis of the so-
called “real” socialism. For Arce, it was imperative to keep looking for alternatives “to the
politics of the looting of the underdeveloped world that was inaugurated 500 years ago by the so-
called ‘discovers’ of new worlds, and which is today called pompously, neoliberal politics.” He also criticized the theological articulations of U.S. theologian Michael Novak, which he
considered religious ideological expressions of neo-liberalism. For him, the anti-vida (anti-

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132 Ibid., 15.
133 Ibid., 18–19.
134 Ibid., 21.
life) character of Novak’s “a-theology” lies in the idolatrous and sacrifice-requiring nature of the “democratic capitalism” and its market economy. For Novak, “democratic capitalism” is a concrete manifestation of God’s incarnation. But, Arce objected, this is fraught with difficulties; it is as if “the ‘theo’ of his theorization is truly God and not a ‘no god,’ God’s negation, and idol, a fetish... [At the end, this is] a truly atheist theorization, which is what I have properly called a-theoism.”

On the other hand, Arce acknowledged that the construction of socioeconomic and political alternatives to the neo-liberal capitalist system must be based on a sustainable economy and a participatory democracy. By sustainable economy he meant an economy designed to satisfy humans needs without destroying the material, spiritual, cultural basis that allow the reproduction of human life and nature. Concerning democracy, and without addressing its implications in the case of Cuba, he noted that a significant reason why the socialist political model entered into a profound crisis was due to the systematic suppression of real participation of people in the processes of making decisions that affect the whole society: “A social regime without the conscious participation of the popular masses, of the immense majority of the population in the fundamental decision of the government will never be able to be called participatory democracy (and much less socialism).”

Despite the efforts to eliminate the structural distortions that prevent social development in a holistic and sustainable way, eastern European socialist countries failed to achieve this goal. Therefore, he acknowledged that changes needed to take place in order to confront the new circumstances—while also insisting that Cuba keep its basic social gains, and most importantly,

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137 Ibid., 11–13.
138 Ibid., 9.
its sovereignty. To accomplish such reconfiguration, he, along with others in positions of government and intellectuals, suggested socialism must be reframed as an ethical-spiritual project, not merely as a socioeconomic and political system. Arce concluded that the neglect of this crucial aspect was a contributing factor for the debacle of ‘socialism’ in Eastern Europe, and, he seemed to imply, this was a critical situation in Cuba.

For Arce, Cuba’s new, shocking exposure to global markets trading patterns and prices, brought about by the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Socialist Bloc, resonated with the destructive consequences of Israel’s historic transition from the tribal federation to the monarchy, in the context of increasing pressures from neighboring empires. The pressures to respond more “adequately” to the “international” political order of the time led Israel to adopt a sociopolitical and economic structure different from Yahwist “socialism.” In the end, Arce thought, the “Solomon syndrome,” that is, the preponderance of the economy over social justice, spiritual-ethnic values, and “national” identity brought the fragmentation of the nation and the loss of its sovereignty. He did not register internal religious, political and economic tensions and class divisions as potential contributing factors. Arce thought that in light of the contemporary global and local situation, the Cuban government was obliged to adopt certain mechanisms of the capitalist market economy. He feared that the choice of such economic mechanisms may ultimately undermine the most important social ethical-spiritual values embodied by the revolution, i.e., distributive justice, social equality, and solidarity; the razón de ser of the revolution was to incarnate these principles.

He affirmed that, while economic resources are necessary these do not determine the revolution nor how long it will last. It will depend on “the ethical, social, and spiritual resources that (Cubans) manage to preserve, even cultivate in the midst of this situation.” Arce strongly believed that, the only way Cuba could survive as an “independent” nation and preserve the social benefits for the majority of the population was by cultivating the rich ethical legacy of figures such as Felix Varela, José de la Luz, José Martí, etc. They helped shape Cuba’s national and cultural ‘identity,’ and the liberating and humanistic social, ethical, and spiritual values that characterized the revolution since its inception. And for these reasons ethics became so central to his reflection during this period.

Throughout the decade of the 1990s and into the twenty first century, Arce re-articulated his theology. Different from previous periods of his work, the 1990s represented a radical shift for Arce. The collapse of “Socialism” deeply impacted the manner in which his theological reflections would revisit “Marxist-Leninist” political theoretical frames. His work became less focused on the strictly political-ideological issues and gravitated toward ethical concerns as they pertained to the political and the economical dimensions. He had to re-contextualize and re-think his theology in response to contemporary issues. Preserving the main thrust of his earlier theology, he needed to rethink the challenges that Cubans were facing during this period. The new context raised new questions, and his theology also changed; he needed to rethink theology in basic ways such as the increasing centrality of values/ethics in thinking about “the

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142 Ibid., 7.
143 Arce, “Panorama de la teología protestante en Cuba,” 39; Arce, “Los valores: un aproche teológico a una de las problemáticas de la actualidad cubana.”

**Conclusion**

No doubt the religious formation and theological education of Sergio Arce deserves a fuller treatment than the one I provide here. My intention in this chapter has been to broadly sketch the main influences on him and complex development of his theology as in response to larger historical changes on the ground. His theology, as I have insisted, was the result of a thoughtful response to the historical issues and changes taking place in the context of Cuba, Latin America and the world. I mark what I consider the main stages of his life and theological articulation, noting how these changed over time. As part of this discussion, in the next chapter, I will outline some of the key themes that emerged in Arce’s theological reflections. I place him in conversation with key liberation theologians in order to show the uniqueness of his thought and how, despite his different vantage points grounded in the unique revolutionary context in Cuba, many of his intuitions resonated with other liberation scholars.
Chapter 3

Theology in Revolution: A Revolution in Theology

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I traced Arce’s theological itinerary showing his responses to the challenges that the Cuban church faced in the process of constructing socialism in Cuba. From a methodological-hermeneutical viewpoint, Arce’s “Theology in Revolution” signified a revolution in theology in the context of Cuba, and also in Latin America. In this chapter, my intention is to flesh out in broad strokes key themes in Arce’s work associated with the relationship between the theological discourses and discourses of the historical projects of liberation. I will discuss Arce’s formulations regarding the historical and sociopolitical-economic character of salvation, as he viewed it concretely expressed in the Cuban revolutionary context. In the same vein, I will also highlight his theological interpretations of “work,” “capitalism,” the relationship between “faith” and “ideology,” and “Marxist atheism,” in his theology in revolution. I show how Arce’s treatment of these and related topics marked his distinctive position—points of convergence and divergence—vis-a-vis other liberation theologians. While I engage primarily insights from Hugo Assmann, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and José Míguez Bonino, at times I will allude to other liberation scholars and their views. I do not engage in an exhaustive examination of the work of these scholars. I deal with them insofar as their work, the similarities and differences, help to clarify the distinctiveness of Arce’s theology. I demonstrate that while Arce’s work can still be considered within the Latin American liberation theological current, his proposal is distinct in terms of theologically interpreting social phenomena and envisioning divine activity in historical occurrences. In this sense, I show how Arce differs from other liberation scholars in the degree to which they related “revolution” and “salvation;” for Arce
there was a deeper, intricate connection between them. I will limit myself in this chapter to his key theological contributions. I will make some critical comments where pertinent, but most critical concerns will be addressed in chapter five. Due to the nature of the discussion, some overlap and repetition will be encounter with the previous chapter. The difference here is that I am following a more thematic focus, which necessitates that I mention some aspects of Arce’s work that have already been addressed.

**Historical Praxis of Liberation and Theological Discourse**

In his *Practical Theology of Liberation*, Hugo Assmann claimed that the emergence of liberation theology involved epistemological, methodological, and hermeneutical disruptions, breaks from traditional ways of doing theology. This shift also included a departure from European ‘progressive’ theological currents, such as political theologies of Johan Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann. Assmann argued that, in contrast to their vague social analysis and their abstract theological language, liberation theology emerged as “a critical reflection on the historical process of liberation in the sense of faith emerging in action, and appeared as a specifically Latin American form of political theology.”

A distinguishing feature of this new approach to doing theology was its threefold starting point: 1) the situation of huge poverty, suffering, and political oppression of the vast majorities of Latin American peoples; 2) their growing awareness of their condition of economic, political, and culturally dominated and dependent nations; and 3) the historical practice of liberation, in the words of Gutiérrez, “through which the poor and oppressed of this world are endeavoring to build a different social order and a new way of being men [sic].” In the perspective being forged

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by Latin American liberation theologians, these three aspects were articulated in the terms of the preferential option for the poor and oppressed. This option became the motto and interpretive frame used by these theologians.

Assmann pointed out that reflecting theologically on liberation from those oppressive realities implied for most Latin American theologians the adoption of social analyses influenced in various ways by Marxist critical approaches and dependency theories. Not all dependency theorists, in all their multiple expressions and diversity, were “Marxist”; indeed, some explicitly rejected the label “Marxist”. Moreover, Assmann also argued that the incorporation of these kind of socio-analytical approaches were not a natural consequence of Vatican II and the ecclesial reform that followed it in Latin America in particular with the leadership of the Latin American Conference of Catholic Bishops (CELAM); rather, it was a decisive rupture with the discourse of development and even with the descriptive language used in Medellín, Columbia (1968), to speak about the Latin American social realities. For him, the sociopolitical and theological discourses of liberation meant taking “a new analytical stance with regard to the situation [of under-development] of our countries… and, consequently, a new point of departure from which to map out the political and economic ways out of this situation.”

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5 Ibid., 130.
For his part, Assmann, echoing the arguments of many Marxists concerning “praxis”, and the biblical emphasis on concretely witnessing to/practicing faith, framed the theological task not as a mere interpretation of the world but to contributing to its transformation.\(^6\) This view was widely shared among Latin American liberation theologians. They all understood their task, as Míguez Bonino noted, not as a speculative effort to decipher in metaphysical terms God’s mystery, but as critical articulation of “the action of faith, the shape of praxis conceived and realized in obedience” to the Gospel of the reign of God.\(^7\) Gutiérrez stated that the Church was “called to make a contribution from its own task, the proclamation of the Gospel, to the abolition of a society built by and for the benefit of a few, and to the construction of a different social order, more just and more humane.”\(^8\) For him, this social process of liberation meant “a profound transformation of the private property system, access to power of the exploited class, and a social revolution that would break this dependence” in order to create “a new society, a socialist society –or at least allow that such a society might be possible.”\(^9\)

Discussing the general features of a “Latin American socialist project of liberation,” Míguez Bonino advocated a socialist project that, while rejecting any “developmentalist” strategy, led to a break with the relation of dependence with the neo-colonial and imperialist centers of power. For Míguez Bonino, a crucial component of this socialist project was the establishment of a “strong centralized government,” while also insisting on the democratic character of the project.\(^10\) At the same time, he emphasized the general “refusal to accept any of the existing models (even Cuba) as a stereotype to be copied.”\(^11\) In the last analysis, he conceived

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\(^6\)Ibid., 122.
\(^10\)Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, 39.
\(^11\)Ibid., 40.
the “socialist project of liberation” as a distinct comprehensive political-economic-cultural project that ultimately seeks to create a new humanity.\textsuperscript{12}

Although many liberation theologians agreed on the “socialist” character of the “new social order” to build, they also recognized different approaches, and many unanswered questions in terms of goals, strategies, and analytical frameworks.\textsuperscript{13} In particular, Assmann noted that most of those who used the language of liberation in the early 1970s in Latin America remained very vague about the strategies that would lead to “a form of socialist society,” and acknowledging that “the priorities in terms of method and tactics may still have to be worked out.”\textsuperscript{14} In his opinion, liberation as an effective revolutionary way to ending the situation of dependence, poverty, political oppression, and economic exploitation in under-developed countries, required “the working out of a strategy (which must involve choosing a particular political approach), and of the tactical steps for carrying out this strategy in the light of the most urgent needs.”\textsuperscript{15} In other words, the process of liberation required the development of revolutionary theory and forging a concrete historical project of liberation.\textsuperscript{16} On the other hand, Gutiérrez pointed out that even though the socialist “model” of society inspired most of those who engaged the struggles for liberation in Latin America, such orientation was not monolithic. Instead, there were various and even conflicting views, theoretical approaches, and political strategies from which to build the Latin American socialist projects.\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{14}Assmann, \textit{Practical Theology of Liberation}, 116–17. \\
\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 131. \\
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 142. \\
\textsuperscript{17}Gustavo Gutiérrez, \textit{A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation}, 88–89.
\end{flushleft}
While seen as positive by many, Arce considered the plurality of socio-analytical frameworks and views of historical projects of liberation, political strategies for the struggle, and revolutionary theories as a problem. From his perspective, many theological discourses of liberation were deeply ambiguous, abstract, and divisive. He repeatedly objected to what he perceived as the reluctance of many liberation theologians to consider the sociopolitical and economic system as adopted by the “Cuban Revolution,” as a concrete and successful historical project of liberation. For him, this project provided material examples useful for their own historical projects of liberation in Latin America. In addition, he strongly criticized their neglect of theological reflections articulated from within the context of the Cuban revolutionary process. In the Encounter of Theologies that took place in Mexico City, 1977, he voiced such concern:

I have the impression—please, correct me if I wrong—that in general, the authors of the theology of liberation ignore the fact that a people who have a class conscience of themselves do not necessarily have to be an oppressed people…. there are peoples who have a conscience of themselves who have already walked the path of liberation…who have assumed a concrete and specific ideological option with proven positive historical results. As it appears to me, … liberation theology … [has] to include the experience, the theological reflection of the peoples that have a class conscience of themselves [namely Cubans], and who have walked the path of liberation after adopting a specific ideology that has led them from victory to victory in the liberating process.

While in this particular instance Arce used highly abstract and idealized concepts to speak of the “liberation” of the Cuban people, there is no denying that he meant liberation in a

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18Míguez Bonino insisted that the Cuban revolution was not a model to be reproduced elsewhere; but he acknowledged its inspirational value as “a sign that change is possible however costly.” In this sense, he noted that “Cuba has been the cradle of a new revolutionary consciousness” in Latin America. Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation, 33. For Gutiérrez, the Cuban revolution represented a point of inflection of the political history of the mid-twentieth century Latin America. See Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 89. However, perhaps referring to conflict among “Marxist” groups in different countries, he argued that the significance of the Cuban revolution for left wing and liberation movements in the continent had to be qualified since “the relationship of the current Cuban regime with certain Latin American revolutionary groups has become very complex in the last few years” (Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 96 n.34).

very narrow sense, referring specifically to class issues and debates. Assmann welcomed Arce’s incisive comment. In response he agreed in principle that there were liberating experiences, strategies and paths not yet walked in other Latin American countries, from which they could and should learn. He found in Arce’s participation in that historical meeting a promising way of dialogue between liberation theologians and Cuban theologians, a dialogue that hardly begun. He warned that a liberation theology that “does not learn from the experiences of other incipient revolutions or other more maturely triumphant...is missing more than a chapter.”

Other theologians present at that meeting also recognized Arce’s contribution to the liberation theological thought, specifically related to the necessary link between the theological task and the actualization of historical projects of liberation. Luis Rivera Pagán ratified Arce’s claim that the theological reflections on the processes of liberation in Latin America have consistently neglected contributions from Cuban theologians. And he acknowledged Arce’s contributions in re-opening the dialogue between liberation theologians and Cuban revolutionary theologians. In his view, Arce’s theological reflection was articulated in direct connection with the struggle of a people that sought to construct a more just and egalitarian society; such experiences, he thought, were valuable in the liberation struggles of other peoples. As he said, this theology was not elaborated according to vague and abstract criteria of liberating the present and opening to the future, but in the context of debates and struggles over constructing a concrete alternative to capitalist structures of exploitation.

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21 Ibid., 182.
In the same meeting, Augusto Cotto also noted Arce’s central role in articulating the experiences of Christians in a socialist society and the aspirations of liberation theology.\textsuperscript{22} According to him, Arce contributed to forging a “revolutionary theology of liberation” through reflecting on Cuban Christians’ participation in the socialist revolutionary process, and to elaborating a new ecclesiology critical of the colonized and colonizing Christianity imposed on Latin American peoples. Cotto specifically pointed to one of Arce’s articles from 1971, in which he explicitly linked “liberation” and “revolution.”

It is not about a revolution ‘a la Europeans’ in order to raise the levels of previous developments. We are not talking about a ‘developmentalism’ transplanted from its context to our underdeveloped societies. We are talking about a liberation ‘a la Cuba’ that makes [it] possible to start off [on] the road to development. We are talking about life or death issues for the starving two thirds of humanity and for the one third abundantly fed. It is about the humanization or dehumanization of the exploited but also of the exploiters.\textsuperscript{23}

As Assmann wrote, one of the principal contributions of liberation theologians, from a methodological viewpoint, was their redefinition of the meaning of the theological task in the context of oppression-liberation.\textsuperscript{24} On this point, Arce’s contribution was significant. He insisted that “[t]heological construction along that liberating line would not be merely a result of the experience of fighting ‘against’ imperialism, but would also include the experience of fighting ‘on behalf of’ socialism and its construction.”\textsuperscript{25} He argued that the question was not to theorize religiously about the revolution (“theology of the revolution”), but to do a “revolution in

\textsuperscript{22}Augusto Cotto, “El diálogo necesario entre Cuba y el resto del continente,” in *Praxis cristiana y producción teológica (Materiales del Encuentro de teologías celebrado en la Comunidad Teológica de México, 8-10 Octubre, 1977)*, eds. Jorge Pixley and Jean Pierre Bastián (Salamanca, España: Sígueme, 1979), 244–45.
\textsuperscript{24}Assmann, *Practical Theology of Liberation*, 57.
theology." Rather than developing a theology of liberation, a “liberation of theology” was needed:

In the world of the exploitation of man [sic] by another man [sic], theology has served as the bridge to philosophical rationalities and congruencies that made it possible for the faith to become comprehensible, accessible to the culture. It was about ‘cultures’ of oppression and exploitation. Nevertheless, for the peoples that have already begun the difficult path toward liberation, their theology is about a radical shift in the direction of this mediation. Our theology needs to be liberated from the ideologies of the oppressing classes. This means a revolution... For us, this means to mediate the culture of our world, the culture of liberation—the culture that responds to the ideology of the equality of the liberating and revolutionary classes—for the faith; that is, the church and those Christians who remain bound and captive—in diverse ways and varying-to the ideological webs of the past we have left behind.26

There are noticeable similarities between other liberation theologians and Arce concerning the socioeconomic and political situations of Latin American countries, and the salvific significance of the historical praxis of liberation as an anticipatory fulfillment of the reign of God. They also agreed on the necessity of elaborating a theological critique of the ideologization of Christian faith in the service of the imperialist capitalist system of exploitation and oppression. How they agree or differ on these and other issues will be the focus of the rest of this chapter. To that I now turn.

**Salvation and Historical Projects of Liberation**

One of the most significant contributions of liberation theologians is their understanding of salvation in relation to history. For liberation theologians, salvation concerns the historical realization of the reign of God in the midst of a reality dominated by powerful forces that oppose its emergence (the anti-reign), a reality characterized by exploitation, poverty, suffering, and death as the result of a long and complex history of colonial and imperialist and class domination. That is the context in which the vast majority of people in Latin America and the

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“Third World” live, and from which liberation theologians recover the concern for liberation in the Bible and connect them to the realization of the reign of God and salvation in history. While emphasizing the historical character of salvation, they do not speak of a total identification of liberation in sociohistorical terms and the reign of God.\textsuperscript{27}

Just as other liberation theologians, Arce also criticized the individualistic, spiritualizing, and otherworldly soteriological formulations inherited from North American and European dominant theological traditions.\textsuperscript{28} He interpreted the concept “salvation” as including “liberation” in sociohistorical terms.

1. \textit{History of Salvation or Salvation of History? The Historical Character of Salvation and the Salvific Integration of History}

With other liberation theologians, Arce strongly rejected theological notions that dichotomize history as secular history and salvation history.\textsuperscript{29} A commonly known example of this critical position among liberation theologians is Gutiérrez’s statement that “there are not two histories, one profane and one sacred ‘juxtaposed’ or ‘closely linked’,” but only one history, a whole creative and salvific process through which God acts liberating and reconciling humans with Godself and with each other, and recreating them in the image of Christ.\textsuperscript{30} Also for Arce, there is only one history, through which God’s creative, redemptive, and renewing will is manifested. He conceived God’s saving work as taking place not outside history but inside and through history. “The formation of the new humanity is a dynamic process in which God’s


\textsuperscript{28}Assmann, \textit{Practical Theology of Liberation}, 67; Míguez Bonino, \textit{Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation}, 132–53.


\textsuperscript{30}Gutiérrez, \textit{A Theology of Liberation}, 153.
creative, liberating, and integrating act is involved.” Arce understood the history of salvation as an encompassing process of creation, redemption, and reconciliation of humanity and the rest of nature, in which humans have been called by God to play a key role.

When we have available the cosmic creative forces that enlists humans within their creative work, humans are constituted in co-gatherers, comrades, partners, not of other humans alone...but appear as partners, comrades, and co-gatherers of the “divine” creative forces that operate in the world within the creation process, which is at the same time redemptive, reconciling; that is to say, liberating and integrating.

Arce stressed the uncompromising recognition of the responsibility humans have for the rest of creation, that is humans are creation’s oikonomoi. In other words, there is no salvation of humanity without salvation of creation. However, he also highlighted the central place of humanity—in its historical concreteness—within the notion of salvation as a fundamental step for articulating a liberation theology. He stated that from a biblical viewpoint, the “sacred” character of history lies precisely in its human character. He argued that biblical writers’ main concern was the “human being” in terms of origin, history, and destiny. When they refer to other issues, including God, it is closely linked to the problem of the human creature and its historical existence. According to him, the history of salvation always becomes concrete in a given moment by taking a human name. “If not, it does not have any sequence with the biblical salvation which is always translated into human language, becoming incarnate in some definite historic phenomenon of liberation.” Thus for him, the Gospel is “the good news of liberation of humanity [including the rest of God’s creation] that is made concrete throughout human history,

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34 Ibid.
which becomes ‘history-of-liberation’.”

In light of these claims, one understands his interest in reclaiming the social conditions of humans and their historical praxis of liberation as objects of theological reflection.

This formulation has two distinct implications for our thinking about history and salvation: the historical character of salvation (salvation is an intrahistorical reality), and history itself as object of salvation. Arce interpreted history not only as the stage on which humanity is realized as such, but also as the “way” through which this process works. “History is a process toward total liberation, the end of which is the total humanization of humanity.”

This approach was epitomized in the Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Cuba, 1977: “All human history is... a process of integrating reconstruction of the human being.”

History, therefore, is also reconstructed throughout this process. He wrote: “History is the process in which the Reign of God becomes concrete” while “the ferment of the reign of God congeals human history.”

Míguez Bonino made a similar claim when saying that the reign of God “redeems, transforms, and perfects the ‘corporality’ of history and the dynamics of love that has operated in it.” For him, the coming of the reign of God did not mean the “denial of history but the elimination of its corruptibility, its frustrations, weakness, ambiguity–more deeply, its sin–in order to bring to full realization the true meaning of the communal life of man [sic].”

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38 Arce, “Hacia una teología de la liberación,” 98.
40 Sergio Arce, La teología como desafío, Selecciones Bíblico-Teológicas (La Habana, Cuba: Consejo Ecuménico de Cuba, 1980), 44.
42 Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation, 142.
Gutiérrez stated that, salvation, understood as “the communion of human beings with God and among themselves–orients, transforms, and guides history to its fulfillment.”

From Arce’s perspective, the conflicts that emerge from the processes of socio-economic and political liberation energize history. But he did not absolutely identify the historical realization of the reign of God through concrete projects of liberation with its eschatological fulfillment. “The Reign does not cease to be always in the future despite its present expressions. Eschatological hope is part of the ‘Reign that is in our midst’ [Luke 17:21].” He emphasized the twofold nature of the God-future, who “is always in the future without ceasing to act in the present with the future of humanity in sight, which is God’s own future,” and whose presence is “impossible to grasp outside God’s very action.” God who is revealed as God-futurity is also the God who is manifested with other names: “Emmanuel, ‘God with us,’ and above all with the evangelical name of Yeshua, YHWH is Liberation.”

The similarities among the perspectives of Assmann, Gutiérrez, and Míguez Bonino’s are striking. With varying degrees of explicitness, each of them pointed to the dialectic relation between the historical realization of the reign of God through historical liberating projects, and its eschatological fulfillment. Gutiérrez, for example, asserted that “without liberating historical events, there would be no growth of the Kingdom. But the process of liberation will not have conquered the very roots of human oppression…without the coming of the Kingdom, which is above all a gift.” He made a distinction between the growing anticipation of the reign of God in history, as the result of liberating praxis, and its definitive coming, which is an eschatological

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44 Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 152.
48 Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 177. (italics added)
divine event. Meanwhile, Míguez Bonino defended liberation theologians’ use of terms such as “growth” and “construction” to refer to the realization of the reign of God in history, despite the risk of appearing naively optimist regarding human capabilities. He argued that the reign of God “is not merely adumbrated, reflected, foreshadowed, or analogically hinted at the individual and collective realizations of love in history, but actually present, operative, authentically—however imperfectly and partially—realized.”

In Arce’s view, the discourse of salvation must be translated into the language of liberating socio-political-economic choices. Although the salvific scope of these liberating historical processes will be partial, they “always imply a step forward toward the increasing humanization of man [sic], that is, his increasing koinonization.” Conversely, when humans absolutize the structures through which they realize their humanity and pretend to have achieved their fullness as humans, arriving at “the end of history,” then they destroy their own dynamic nature, and begin their own dehumanization.

2. The Integral (Holistic) Character of Salvation/Liberation

Arce interpreted the Christian witness of salvation in Christ not as a proselytizing proclamation of an otherworldly future salvation of souls but as the announcement of Jesus Christ in the liberating praxis of “efficacious love,” that seeks to help humans to fully live and realize their humanness with dignity; that is God’s purpose. This testimony refers to the whole reality of Jesus Christ as a human being and, therefore, to all humanity. “Either we save the whole human—spirit and matter, soul and body—or we lose everything... either we save all of

49 Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, 142.
humanity or we save no one.”

For him, there was not such a thing as an individual salvation of the soul. The liberation that does not embrace the whole human life and society is not salvation at all. According to Arce, “[e]very liberating moment in society, every attempt of reconciling humans with themselves, with others, and with nature, is an actualization of God’s reconciling activity.”

He insisted that, from a biblical viewpoint, humans cannot be removed from their socio-cultural contexts. Their social dimension is inherent in their own existence since the divine image from which humanity has been created is a “social” image. “Humans are the creatures of a ‘God-society’: their etiology is social, their development is social, and their destiny is social.”

In his view, this communal anthropological conception is expressed in the New Testament in the term *koinonia*, which he translated as *compañerismo* (comradeship), a term which, throughout its first three decades, symbolized the social ethos of the Cuban revolutionary process. Hence he understood the construction of the “new society” and the formation of a “new human being” as complementary facets of the same salvific process. The 1977 Confession of Faith of the IPRC, which incorporated many of Arce’s theological insights, states that:

3.C.02: The ‘creation’ of a ‘new man’ means the establishment of a new community life in the new society, where there is no place for the exploitation of the work of another, nor for racial discrimination nor the subjection of women as objects of mercantile, commercial or sexual consumption; nor will there be tolerance for the self-interested use of the legitimate values of family life in benefit of the false interests of the classist and discriminatory society.

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54 Arce, “Cristo y la liberación social,” 172.
Like other liberation theologians from his generation, Arce interpreted the liberation announced and witnessed by the Scriptures, and to a certain extent already lived by the Cuban people, as having a social, political and economic content. For liberation theologians, liberation meant basically eliminating conditions of economic poverty, political oppression, and cultural domination, which were the result of Latin American countries’ long lasting dependency from the centers of capitalist world system, and the role played by national oligarchies on consolidating the neo-colonial system. In Arce’s case, he interpreted the socioeconomic and political content of salvation/liberation in clear reference to the process of demolishing the ‘old’ capitalist social order and constructing socialism in Cuba. “The destruction of an old state of things, the elimination of an imperialist order... is the only way that God uses to complete God’s purpose of creating a human order each time more just and more humane.”

Arce and the vast majority of other liberation theologians did not reduce the notion of salvation to liberation from oppressive sociopolitical-economic relationships and structures. Gutiérrez argued that the liberation of humans throughout history implies much more than


58 Arce, “Hacia una teología de la liberación,” 46. The 1977 Confession of Faith of the IPRC states that “the victorious struggle for the socio-political-economic liberation from the exploitation with which capitalist, monopolist, and imperialist interests oppress the underdeveloped peoples of today, is the explicit, concrete and valid expression of their salvation, which constitutes them as God’s new humanity.” (3.A.08)

59 Míguez Bonino, for instance, pointed out that

“As time has moved, the very experience of the struggle for social (structural) transformation has led us, within the parameters of social macro analysis, to pay increasing importance to the subjective (personal and communal) dimension of that change... But it is necessary to bear in mind that this is not a shift from the earlier concern with social, economic, and political liberation but a deepening of the personal, subjective, and intersubjective concerns that, from the beginning, found expression in the motifs of 'the spirituality of poverty,' personalization, celebration, and so many others” [José Míguez Bonino, “Love and Social Transformation in Liberation Theology,” in Love: The Foundation of Hope. The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, Frederic B. Burnham, Charles S. McCoy, and M. Douglas Meeks (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1988), 60].

improving their economic and political conditions through social revolutions with the consequent transformation of social structures. Liberation also means “the continuous creation of a new way of being human, a permanent cultural revolution.”

Arce developed a similar approach. He claimed that “salvation in the Bible is always translated within some specific historical phenomenon of liberation and integration that always carries with it a greater humanization of humanity.” Referring specifically to the liberating meaning of the Cuban revolutionary process, he noted that the revolution “starts as a socioeconomic and political liberation, but it must continue to be the creation of a renewed and integrated human being.” And by reflecting on the theological task concerning the liberation of Latin American peoples, he argued that it was not only about restructuring the worldwide socioeconomic and political order but recreating humans for a “new society.” He was aware that, while necessary, the socioeconomic and political structural changes alone are not sufficient to positively transform individuals in correspondence to the new social reality that they seek to build. This does not mean, however, that the liberating transformation of society could be accomplished only through individual changes. In his view, individuals cannot be liberated without transforming the oppressive and exploitative social, economic and political structures and relations. Individual liberation only becomes genuine when inserted into the social

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60 Gustavo Gutiérrez, “¿Crece o declina la iglesia latinoamericana?,” in Gustavo Gutiérrez et al, Liberación, opción de la iglesia en la década del 70 (Bogotá, Editorial Presencia, 1970), 11. Quoted by Assmann, Practical Theology of Liberation, 55; Gutiérrez interpreted salvation/liberation as operating in three interrelated dimensions of reality. The first one refers to the political-economic liberation of oppressed nations and social groups. The second level of salvation is more anthropologically defined. It demands a cultural transformation, which embraces not only the social structures, but also the world views and consciousness of humans. This level draws attention to the creation of a new humanity in order to build a new society. The third dimension of salvation stresses the liberation of sin and, consequently, the communion between humans with God and between them. Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 36–37.
61 Arce, “Hacia una teología de la liberación,” 58.
62 Arce, Ibid. 61
64 Arce, “Is a Theology of the Revolution Possible?” 211.
65 Arce, “Cristo y la liberación social,” 170.
liberation. Yet, social liberation is irreducible to socioeconomic and political structural shifts. It includes a spiritual transformation of individuals through which they become liberated “as spirit, as consciousness, [and] as social beings.” For Arce, social liberation fundamentally meant the creation of “new humans” through a struggle against all kinds of structures and relations that oppose such reconstructing and integrating process, be they social, political, economic, cultural, ideological, and religious. He argued that “[a]ll social revolution, insofar as it is a real revolution, constitutes a partial but valid achievement that brings us closer to the ‘the day of the final liberation’.”

I want to note that, notwithstanding his linear and often simplistic understanding of history and of salvation in history, Arce interpreted salvation as the socio-economic, political, cultural, spiritual, and ecological reconstruction of humans as communal beings, in the image of God. As he wrote,

Jesus Christ is actualized in the militant participation of each of those who form the believing people, and who are committed to the task of reconstructive integration of the human; (the) creation of a new society... and the creation of a ‘new human being’ in their spiritual, socioeconomic, and ecological totality. The integrity of the whole of the human being is what the scriptures identify as Shalom, Peace.

3. The Triune God’s preferential option for the poor through the Revolution

Liberation theologians’ assertion that God makes a preferential option for the poor and, therefore, Christians must do the same, constitutes one of their main theological insights. As Míguez Bonino stated, “Christ realized in his own life and death God’s solidarity with the poor and oppressed. He made himself one of them, sharing the full weight of their suffering and death

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66Ibid., 171.
68Arce, “Cristo y la liberación social,” 183.
69Arce, “Perspectivas de la tarea teológica a partir de la praxis de la construcción de una nueva sociedad: su vinculación con la realización de la paz,” 18.
and involves us in his solidarity with them.”  

According to Arce, God makes the preferential option for the poor for no other reason than for being exploited, oppressed, marginalized, discriminated against, and impoverished. God’s option for the poor is not limited to God’s compassion and solidarity with the oppressed in their situations of exploitation, poverty, suffering, and death; it entails God’s liberating action in favor of the victims of the oppressive systems. In Arce’s view, God’s prerogative to act as God lies precisely in making that option: “to be God of the poor, the exploited and oppressed, to be a God liberating from poverty, an ‘avenging God of the poor,’ a God of total liberation.”

Arce claimed that God’s preferential option for the poor means that God takes sides for them and encourages them in their struggles for liberation from poverty, exploitation, and unjust suffering and death. “God is committed! God is always involved in favor of the human community... on the side of the victims of unjust structures of power absolutized because of the selfishness and diabolical ambition of the victimizers.” Stated differently, “God is anti-imperialist because God is for the oppressed, for the poor, and for the exploited.”

Reading the biblical passage on Moses and the “burning bush” (Ex 3) in light of the historical praxis of socio-economic and political liberation, Arce interpreted the image of the “consuming fire that does not extinguish” as the “liberating will of the exploited people.” He conceived God (Yahweh) as “God who wills liberation, who is always in the future, always

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71Míguez Bonino, “Love and Social Transformation in Liberation Theology,” 68.
75Ibid.
76Arce, “Hacia una teología de la liberación,” 97.
ahead” or, even as “God-future-of-liberation-present-with-the-oppressed,” since God is also Emmanuel: “God with us,” and, therefore, “God not without us.” Properly understood, he wrote, “God with us” means that God is participating with us in the struggle against the imperialist oppression. Hence God is also named with a human name (“too human”): Joshua (Jesus), i.e., “God-is-liberation-that-becomes-historically-fulfilled.” According to Arce, God

is no longer just God-future-liberation that we seek to achieve; it is no longer God-with-us-in-the-oppression. Now, YHWH-liberates is God-the-actualization-of-liberation. It is liberation being actualized, because it is not only a servant who is incarnated, is Lord that resurrects. It is the Spirit of God that is now the Spirit of Christ... ‘God-is-actualized-liberation; God-is-concrete-liberation-in-victorious-action.’ God is action being actualized, is work being realized, God is a realization being realized. God is not an idea that we preach, is a truth that we live.80

Arce perceived liberation not coming from a God who is “outside” of people and history, but emerging from the people’s lived faith commitment, including their faith in God the Liberator, to fight against oppressive and exploitative social structures and human relations, in order to create a society more in correspondence to the reign of God.81 As he claimed,

Every attempt to liberate the human being from poverty, slavery, ignorance, exploitation, as Jesus of Nazareth announced, means a revolution. The revolution is the tearing down of enslaving structures, but even more, it is the recreation of the human being from created interests in order to pursue the most genuine interest; it is a rebirth of the man [sic] from the structural constrains who is launched in the search for new ways toward his historical becoming. That is what the biblical language meant by ‘the year of the Lord.’82

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77Ibid., 98.
78Arce, “La teología como desafío,” 44.
79Ibid.
82Arce, “Hacia una teología de la liberación,” 56.
This point leads us to highlight the Trinitarian perspective he brought to the issue of the relation between God and the revolutionary social processes. In Arce’s view, the “revolutionary way” is the method that the triune God employs in order to fulfill God’s creative, liberating (redemptive), and integrating (reconciling) purposes in relation to nature, humans, and history. Drawing particularly on the first chapter of Genesis, he noted that every creative divine act implies a negation of those forces opposed to the emergence of new life, e.g., liberation from chaos, darkness, and death. Stating distinctly and radically from the vantage point of his experience of the Cuban revolutionary process during the 1960s, he insisted: “every revolutionary moment is a highly divine moment of creativity. The more revolutionary it is the more radically it will manifest the divine activity.” For him, it is in this specific revolutionary sociopolitical context that human dignity is restored. In this context the Trinitarian presence of God can be experienced because the “temple” of the Spirit is rebuilt; the human condition “of these little ones” (brothers and sisters) of the Son is restored, and they are, therefore, “re-created as creatures of the Father.”

4. The Cuban Socialist Revolution as a Historical Project of Liberation

In the early 1960s, Arce and other Cuban pastors, such as Rafael Cepeda, started to interpret the unfolding revolutionary process in theological and salvific terms.

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83Ibid., 46–62.
85Arce, “Perspectivas de la tarea teológica a partir de la praxis de la construcción de una nueva sociedad: su vinculación con la realización de la paz,” 15.
86Cepeda argued in 1965 that “Las revoluciones del mundo contemporáneo no son más que un aspecto de la historia de la acción redentora de Dios para la restauración del hombre [sic] al orden creado por Él [sic]” [Rafael Cepeda, “La conducta cristiana en una situación revolucionaria,” in Vivir el Evangelio: Reflexiones y experiencias (La Habana, Cuba: Editorial Caminos, 2003), 17)]. He also pointed out that “la verdadera situación revolucionaria está en Dios, está con Dios. El cambio fundamental proviene de Él, y por Él se produce la incesante transformación del hombre y de sus circunstancias salvadoras” (Cepeda, “La conducta cristiana en una situación revolucionaria,” 18). One year before, in 1964, he had pointed out the need of “indagar humilde y apasionadamente cuál es la relación de los propósitos de Dios con los sucesos revolucionarios de esta hora” [Rafael Cepeda, “Carta abierta,” in Vivir el evangelio: reflexiones y experiencias (La Habana, Cuba: Editorial Caminos, 2003), 15]. Already in 1960, Cepeda encouraged the church to discover the ways in which the “Lord of history” relates to the radical social, political,
In this society... it is incumbent upon us the exaltation of the real values of the human spirit that other previous social models have exalted as ideals but without objective realization, such as love, altruism, human fraternity, life in community, the equality of opportunities for all, justice serving human development, and democracy.\(^\text{87}\)

For Arce, the liberating significance of the Cuban revolution did not lie only in the fact that it was a populist and nationalist social revolution that brought about significant socioeconomic, political, and cultural changes. In his view, the radicalness of those transformations and their liberating impact on society, and more concretely in peoples’ lives, lay precisely in the Marxist-Leninist character\(^\text{88}\) that the leaders adopted.\(^\text{89}\) As he saw it, only a “Socialist, Marxist-Leninist” perspective would enable people to grasp the reigns of their own destiny as a nation, to understand their situation, to organize to transform it, and to forge a qualitative better social order and a way of being human in the future.\(^\text{90}\) In fact, he judged that only through Marxist-Leninist socialist revolutions could other Latin American peoples overcome their situations of economic and political dependence to the centers of the neo-colonial economic, cultural, and ideological transformations that took place through the advance of the revolutionary process [Rafael Cepeda, “La iglesia en una tierra nueva,” in El tiempo y las palabras: artículos y mensajes de Rafael Cepeda (1947–1997), ed. Carlos R. Molina (Quito, Ecuador: CLAI, 2004), 66]. For his part, Arce asserted that his faith as a Christian found a meaningful sense as he saw Jesus Christ’s Gospel incarnated by the revolutionary process. “I am a Christian,” he wrote, “because, through the drastic revolutionary changes in my native land, I have come to know that God is revealed in Christ as one who ‘discloses might with the deeds of God’s right arm, putting the arrogant of heart and mind to rout, bringing down imperial powers from their thrones, satisfying the hungry with good things, and sending the rich empty away’ (Luke 1: 51-52)” [Sergio Arce, “Why Am I a Christian?” in The Church and Socialism: Reflections from a Cuban Context (New York, NY: New York CIRCUS Publications, 1985), 7–8].

\(^{87}\)Arce, “La formación teológica en una sociedad socialista,” 231.

\(^{88}\)By Marxist-Leninist Arce understood the collective ownership of the means of production, centralized and planned economy, the dictatorship of the proletariat and a vanguard party leading the process, in this case the communist party. Notwithstanding his support of the Marxism-Leninism as expressed in Cuba, Arce did not embrace its scientific atheism. He did, however, try to reclaim what he saw as the “prophetic” character of “Marxist” atheism. I will discuss this further later on this chapter.


\(^{90}\)Arce, “The Mission of the Church in a Socialist Society.”
capitalist world system. This was a very distinctive claim by Arce when compared to other liberation theologians. Especially in retrospect, it is easy to see that the specific characteristics of the context (locus enuntiationis) from which he built his theology, including the Marxist-Leninist political-ideological framework that he “adopted,” help explain this distinctiveness and radicalness.

Arce was convinced that the Cuban revolutionary process was redemptive in character. He grounded his views on the historical experiences of the Cuban peoples who, for him, liberated themselves from capitalist imperialistic domination. He did not mean that the integral liberation announced in the gospel was fully realized with the “Marxist-Leninist socialist revolution.” Rather, he meant that this specific project as strategy of social construction constituted the most effective path to advance in the search of the liberation envisioned by liberation theologians.

This conviction colored his theological reflections on economic-political and ideological issues. He wrote about topics such as the liberating significance of eliminating private ownership and establishing socialist forms of production and distribution of goods; the negation of the liberating character of work in the capitalist system; “Marxist atheism” as a prophetic critique of Christian bourgeois ideology; and the need of re-ideologizing faith and theology. All these themes occupied central places in his theology.

Work as Spiritual Fulfillment and Christian Witness

Since the mid-1960s, the theme of “work” (labor) came to occupy a central place in Arce’s theology. In 1965, he elaborated an incipient theology of work informed by key insights from Marx. He helped initiate interpretative paths on the issue of work, which were later

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developed by other liberation theologians as well.⁹² Arce strongly rejected the traditional notion of work simply as a means of subsistence, a profession, or, even more, as a commodity (as an object of economic exploitation). Instead, he interpreted it as the means through which humans can fulfill their social nature and destiny as communal beings. As for Christians, he argued that work becomes the most concrete way to consciously bear a testimony of their vocation and “likeness to God,” as co-creators and ecónomos (stewards) of spiritual/material goods for the well-being of the whole society.⁹³

He claimed that the liberating praxis of work constituted an essential component of Christians’ spirituality and of their role in a socialist society. He asserted that the witness of Christians must go beyond the contributions to society made by non-believer revolutionaries. Christians must realize that, by contributing to society through their creative work, they were not only fulfilling socially themselves as human beings, but also executing a divine task.⁹⁴ When working for what is socially useful, they worked for the Lord.⁹⁵ In commenting Jesus’ phrase: “I work and my Father works,” Arce highlighted God’s permanent creative efforts for redeeming the whole creation, at the same time reminding Christians of their responsibility to be witnesses of the creative, redemptive and integrating divine action in the world.⁹⁶

According to Arce, the type of socialist society being built in Cuba since the early 1960s provided the conditions for the spiritual realization of individuals as co-creators. He argued that the almost complete eradication of private ownership (especially after 1968), the equitable distribution of the national production and exploitation of natural resources, and an economy

⁹³Arce, “The Mission of the Church in a Socialist Society,” 41–45; Also “Perspectivas de la tarea teológica a partir de la praxis de la construcción de una nueva sociedad,” 13–16.
⁹⁴Arce, “The Mission of the Church,” 43. As he put it, this world “is the workshop where God has put us to do God’s work, which is our work, our work which is God’s work” (Arce, “The Mission of the Church,” 45).
⁹⁶Ibid., 41.
oriented to satisfy the needs of the population rather than to seeking profit were significant contributing factors in achieving that goal. The process of building an alternative society in Cuba was complex and uneven. There were many obstacles, external and internal. People had to make enormous efforts and sacrifices; and so the changes were not always successful. In particular, in order to increase the production of food and to counter the deep scarcity of products during the 1960s and 1970s, extraordinary measures were necessary. They required the massive participation of people in different productive activities.

Reflecting on those experiences, Arce argued that the true compensation for that kind of creative work (although sacrificial but not alienated) was found in the socially positive results that work engendered, rather than in the capitalist formula of the “wage.” From a theological viewpoint, such compensation could be translated as “the satisfaction of knowing that one is a friend, companion, and comrade, not only of the other workers... [but] of the Eternal Laborer, the Eternal Builder of Life, the Creative Force.” He exhorted Christians to “discover” the kenotic and liberating dimension of their witness of faith through their daily work. “By working,” he affirmed, “the Christian is forgetful of self, and ‘denies self,’ offering energy, strength, and all of life itself, with the assurance that, ‘in forgetting ourselves, we find ourselves; in giving, we gain; in dying, we are restored to true life’.”

In joining the rest of their fellow citizens by means of their work with the shared purpose of constructing a more egalitarian society, he claimed, Cuban Christians were providing a public

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97 Arce, “The Mission of the Church,” 43. On this issue, Arce wrestled with the tension between accepting a difficult reality and facing it idealistically. Although recognizing that keeping the mercantile relationship work-wage/reward was necessary in the concrete socioeconomic conditions of Cuba, he somewhat idealistically thought that what should motivate Christians to work the most amidst difficult economic situations was their personal satisfaction of collaborating with God in fulfilling the reign.

testimony of the holiness of the workday and, therefore, of the sacred character of work itself.\textsuperscript{99}

This point became very significant in light of the debate among Christians about the need (or refusal) to work on Sundays, which was a central component of voluntary work campaigns. He found in the resurrection the basis for his argument. “The fact that the Lord’s resurrection took place on the first workday of the week [Mark 16:1] sanctifies, once and for all, those six days which were ordered in Mosaic law to be workdays [Exodus 20:9; Deuteronomy 5:13].”\textsuperscript{100} For Arce, Jesus’ resurrection meant a transgression of the holiness logic behind the Sabbath, a transgression that was already present in his deeds and teachings. With the resurrection of Jesus, the first day of the week not only attained a sacramental character, but through it God withdrew from the “day of rest” its ritual-legalistic holiness.

Now a workday, the first day of the week has acquired a sacramental status, not as something from the first ‘aeon,’ related to a primary activity of God in this world, but rather as something achieved from the new ‘aeon,’ that of the kingdom of heaven, as reconciling element. Hence, work is consecrated as a most essential element in the kingdom, while rest becomes an eschatological hope.\textsuperscript{101}

Arce thought of the Cuban socialist system as having a “Christic” dimension. He claimed that the risen Christ was revealing himself through a Marxist-Leninist social system that seemed to be “strange” and “unknown” for many Cubans, especially for Christians. He drew from the biblical passage of John 21: 1-14, in which the risen Christ appeared as someone unknown to his disciples asking them to share with him the result of their work. As he understood it, Christ

\begin{footnotes}
\item[99] Arce, “The Mission of the Church,” 41. By alluding to the Reformed theological principle of the “sanctity of common life and work,” he also states that “[d]aily work is adoration of and service to God; and a positive attitude toward it, its motivation and its purpose, are essential parts of the Christian witness” (Arce, “The Mission of the Church,” 42).
\item[101] Ibid. Elsewhere Míguez Bonino cited this insight from Arce to bolster his position in relation to the sacramental nature of daily work and biblical anthropological notions in contrast to idealistic philosophical perspectives. See Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, 109–10. It is worth noting however, that Arce’s theological approach has been criticized for his excessive emphasis on “work,” and his almost non-attention to “rest” as a proleptic liberating manifestation of salvation. See Adolfo Ham, “Teología y tradiciones nacionales: una visión protestante,” in Filosofía, teología, literatura: aportes cubanos en los últimos cincuenta años, ed. Raúl Fornet-Betancourt (Aachen, Alemania: Concordia, 1999), 165.
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himself was inviting Cubans—through their enthusiastic and active participation in the revolutionary process—to “the table he is preparing—to which he adds the resources we contribute [by means of their work]—to satisfy his hunger, which is the hunger of everyone, and which can be identified as ours if we truly follow him.”

Arce was convinced that through such work, humans actualize their communal condition, anticipate their social destiny, and reveal their comradeship with each other and with God, and act as God’s co-workers. Understood in that way, work becomes the way through which a true koinonia with our fellow humans and with God can be created. For Christians, this human-divine solidarity should be the main motive and reward for human work, particularly, because their vocation as such is to work “for the purpose of cooperating with God in the integration of humankind into the reign of God.” In line with their vocation for work, Christians contribute to make a reality the prayer: “Venga a nosotros tu reino” (Your Kingdom come) [Mathew 6:10; Luke 11:2]. Still, a profound transformation of the socioeconomic and political structures and relations must take place to prevent or significantly reduce the reproduction of capitalist alienating relations of production and uneven distributions of wealth, and the commodification of work and humans themselves.

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102 Arce, “Perspectivas de la tarea teológica a partir de la praxis de la construcción de una nueva sociedad,” 13.
103 According to Arce, the term sinergós (a fellow worker) in the New Testament implies a relationship between workers in which they are mutually influenced, affected, and transformed by each other’s actions and work. It is not simply about two individuals working “together” side by side, rather, “their actions impact each other and mutually become fellow workers; they integrate themselves as workers and liberate each other by working.” Now they are “work comrades,” a qualitatively superior condition. He adds with the daring claim that “to be ‘work partners with God’ achieves a qualitative transcendence in such a way that makes human beings, and specifically believers, responsible not only for the future of nature but also for the future of God.”[Sergio Arce Martínez, La teología como testimonio: reflexiones teológicas desde un contexto revolucionario (Quito, Ecuador: FUMEC, 1992), 119].
105 Arce, La teología como testimonio, 93. The similarities with the following Gutiérrez’s assertion are notable: “When we state that man realizes his potential in prolonging the work of creation through his labor, we mean that by virtue of this fact he places himself inside the process of saving history. Building the earthly city is not a simple stage of ‘humanization,’ or ‘pre-evangelization,’ as the theology of a few years ago used to have it; it is integrating oneself fully in a saving process that embraces all mankind” (Gutiérrez, ¿Crecer o declinar la iglesia latinoamericana?,” 17. Quoted by Assmann, Practical Theology of Liberation, 68).
The Idolatrous and Anti-Christian Character of Capitalism: The Denial of God and the Human Condition

Arce also criticized the idolatrous and dehumanizing character of “capitalism.” He did this from an interpretation of capitalism as a monolithic socioeconomic system. He incorporated Marxist critical insights and claimed that capitalism, with the worship of the “God Mammon,” the materialistic concept of work as a mere commodity, and the exaltation of private ownership and individualism, prevents humans from realizing their own vocation as co-workers of “God-Love.” As mentioned above, he argued that the theological significance of work lies in its *diacononal* (service), *oikonomic* (stewardship), and *koinonic* (fellowship) dimensions. Work constitutes a vehicle for Christian witness and it is not merely “the price of the bread.” In other words, the capitalist system represents the very negation of God and the human person. Within capitalism, he wrote, there is no possibility for humans to be “saved,” to be liberated as workers and as “creatures in the image of God.” It deprives humans of the possibility of fulfilling their nature and vocation as free co-creators and *econome* (stewards) along with God. It also opposes in practice the action of the Holy Spirit, who is the creator and promoter of *koinonia* (communion, fraternity) with our fellow humans, the rest of creation and with God. As he saw it, capitalism as socioeconomic-political-cultural system is unable to produce and reproduce human spirituality; it becomes the greatest obstacle for the integral fulfillment of humans and the

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historical realization of the reign of God. In this system, human work becomes a mere commodity, an object of mercantile transaction, which can be exploited with the purpose of making profit and continuing the reproductive cycle of capital. As a consequence, humans become commodified: “The human being becomes a mere ‘object,’ a thing transformed into a product for the market.” Thus, capitalism is condemned by God and by history. The socialist revolution, he strongly claimed, is the anticipation of the eschatological judgment upon capitalism. “The time for the divine judgment of the dehumanizing capitalist ‘work-goods-wages’ relationship has come.”

Míguez Bonino developed a similar perspective on work. Although he did not reduce the causes of human alienation to “the distortions of the capitalist society,” he did criticize “the capitalist demonic circle of work-commodity-salary.” Like Arce, he asserted that when humans are alienated from their capacity of being free co-creators—because their work is objectified as something alien to them and turned into a commodity—Christians should respond

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109 Arce, “Teología cubana: teología en Revolución,” 69. Arce did not understand the action of sin as limited to the realm of socioeconomic and political structures and relationships. He strongly believed that the liberation from oppressive socioeconomic and political relations and structures played a significant role, even a predominant one, on the possibilities of redeeming humanity within history. He insisted that the configuration of economic relations (relations of ownership, production, distribution, consumption, etc.) by capitalism, could not create a level of society that can be seen as a whole in the sense of communion, integration, solidarity, freedom, and, therefore, integral fulfillment of individuals. By contrast, he argued that “socialism” as a system, as he understood it in light of the Cuban revolutionary process, provided better conditions for fulfilling those characteristics. Many are the complexities of Arce’s theological position. They deserve a fuller discussion than the one I do here. For the purpose of this chapter, I allude to them only insofar as they directly connect to his larger theological project for the church in Cuba.

110 Arce, “Perspectivas de la tarea teológica a partir de la praxis de la construcción de una nueva sociedad,” 14.


112 Arce, “The Mission of the Church,” 43. Arce’s statement should be understood dialectically. He considered “socialism” as a more socially just, egalitarian, democratic, and biophilic system, as opposed to capitalism, which he called an essentially “necrophiliac” system. He saw socialism as the socio-historical alternative through which God’s condemning verdict on capitalism took place in history. By this eschatological anticipation (of God’s condemnation of the capitalist system through the socialist revolution) Arce did not mean an absolute identification of socialism with the reign of God or that human history had come to an end, in Fukuyama’s terms. In point of fact, he warned against the absolutization of a historical period, a socioeconomic system, or a specific ideology, regardless of its liberating impact in people’s lives. Sergio Arce (ed.), Cuba: un pensamiento teológico revolucionario. Manual de las jornadas Camilo Torres (1971–1983) (La Habana, Cuba: Centro de Estudios del Consejo de Iglesias de Cuba, 1998), 44,52.

113 Míguez Bonino, Doing Theology, 111.
critically incorporating, in a non-dogmatic fashion, a Marxist social analysis/critique of capitalist social configurations. He found in Paul’s rejection of “the works of the law” an interpretive clue to elaborate such a theological critique. The alienation of work in the capitalist economies becomes an expression of the objectification that the works of the law produce: “something ‘valuable in … [itself],’ apart from the doer and the neighbor, as a ‘work’ which can be merchandise in order to buy ‘justification’.”

For Arce, the idolatrous and sacrificial character of “capitalism” lay both in its promotion of the adoration of Mammon (“money,” according to Jesus [Matthew 6:24]), and in the incarnation of this idol, demanding the sacrifice of human lives and nature in order to satisfy its unquenchable thirst for accumulation of wealth to guarantee the reproduction of the system. As he put it, this is the god, the idol to which pro-“capitalist” theologians such as Michael Novak referred to as the “divine nature” of the capitalist market economy. What makes capitalism a “demonic” system, Arce said, is its structural denial of God, which is expressed in the way in which it “organizes” and reproduces life economically, politically, culturally, and ideologically (including religion). He emphasized the intrinsically idolatrous condition of the capitalist system. In this regard, Arce and other liberation theologians were formulating similar approaches to a variety of key theological issues.

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114Ibid., 95-97.
115Ibid., 110.
Arce’s theological critique of capitalism implied two important interwoven theological-missiological ramifications for the church, particularly in a socialist society as constructed in Cuba. They corresponded to what he considered as a necessary de/re-ideologization of faith and theology, and a critical rethinking of the liberating significance of “Marxist atheism” because of its prophetic criticism of the bourgeois religious ideology.

**Re-ideologizing Faith and Theology**

According to Arce, the theological reflection on the praxis of the “church in Revolution,” as part of a people engaged in the construction of a socialist society, must be a political-economic theology. Drawing on Jesus’ assertion that “No one can serve two masters...You cannot serve God and mammon” (Mathew 6:24, NKJV), he argued that such a theological reflection must necessarily have an anticapitalist character. “The anti-God is Mammon, that is, wealth, the accumulation of money and the means of production and distribution of goods in detriment of the majority of people.”¹²¹ Christians cannot adore and serve Jesus’ God and the Idol that demands human sacrifices. Otherwise, they would be opposing and denying Jesus’ teachings and deeds. As a central ingredient of its prophetic mission, the church has an iconoclastic task to realize: denouncing the idols and the idolatrous norms and practices in society. Yet, the church must start by identifying its own idols and idolatrous actions. More important, it “must begin to destroy itself ideologically, to destroy its own idols prophetically.”¹²² The church must de-ideologize itself. In the context of Cuban Protestantism that meant to dismantle the liberal-bourgeois ideological framework within which U.S. missionaries understood and transmitted the “Christian faith” and which the Cuban churches practiced it.

So long as the Cuban church believes in the capitalist idols, and adores them, and believes in ‘free enterprise’ or the ‘American way of life,’ it cannot give its witness prophetically in the midst of the Marxist world. In this respect, the mission of the church will become more evident and clear to us the more we destroy our capitalist idols.\(^\text{123}\)

Arce stated that the Christian bourgeois ideology’s emphasis on “the so-called right to private ‘ownership,’” as one of the central elements of human spirituality, represented an aberration of Jesus’ gospel.

How is it possible to manipulate so grossly the faith of the one “that had no place where to rest his head.” He who affirmed that ‘it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the Reign’ and who demanded that to be one of his disciples they would have to suffer the consequences of militantly opposing the structures of ‘imperialist’ power that exploited the people, who called us to “take on our cross day by day and to follow him”?\(^\text{124}\)

As he saw it, Christian faith is irreducible to any ideology or religious system of doctrines. Yet, it “must be made concrete within the realm of ideology, systems of doctrines, and historical action.”\(^\text{125}\) As humans, Christians have ideologies, make an option for specific ideologies, and participate in the ideological struggle whether consciously or unconsciously. Since humans are ideological creatures, Christians and persons of religious faith in general, cannot practice their faith without framing it ideologically. In the same vein, Míguez Bonino argued that every theological interpretation of history, society, or a biblical text lies in a particular way of being and acting in the world, which underlies a specific ideology that is expressed appropriately to its own time and place. “Any course of action which keeps certain coherence implies a unified perspective on reality, an explicit or implicit project. Ideology, in this sense, has also a positive meaning; it is the instrument through which our Christian

\(^{121}\)Ibid.
\(^{122}\)Arce, “Teología cubana: teología en Revolución,” 75.
\(^{123}\)Arce, “Christian Faith and Ideology,” 133.
obedience gains coherence and unity.” In Arce’s opinion, the problem was not whether Christians could or could not identify themselves with a specific ideology, because they always do. Rather, they must decide with which ideology they will identify their practices of faith in order to be consequent with Jesus’ gospel.

Arce’s emphasis on this particular “re-ideologization” of faith and theology through the incorporation of Marxism-Leninism as “a whole” showed the distinctiveness of his theological perspective within the field of liberationist theologies in Cuba and Latin America. It also brought to light some significant differences between his theological-methodological approach and other liberation theologians’ perspectives. In very generalizing and imprecise terms, he consistently argued that, while most liberation theologians employed Marxist socioeconomic analytical tools to denounce the situation of economic exploitation and political oppression in their dependent capitalist societies, they failed to recognize the relevance of Marxist-Leninist political-economic “theory” as “the best instrument to realize with certainty the political, economic, and social changes that the peoples currently demand for their ultimate liberation.”

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127 In this regard, Míguez Bonino argued: “We cannot, therefore, take too seriously the frequent warnings and admonitions coming from European and (to a lesser extent) American theologians against, our ‘ideological biases’ as if they were speaking from some sort of ideologically aseptic environment” (Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology*, 99).


129 On this issue, he often made gross over-generalizing claims. At times apparently even contradicting himself. For example, in some places, he claimed that one of the characteristics of the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary ideology is its own enrichment through concrete revolutionary praxis (Arce, “Teología cubana: teología en Revolución,” 73). However, in other writings he seemed to consider all ideological manifestations which did not agree with the “classics” of Marxism as almost undifferentiated expressions of an encompassing bourgeois liberal ideology or revisionist efforts that ended up serving the interests of capitalism and imperialism. See Arce, “Christian Faith and Ideology,” 134.

130 Arce, “Perspectivas de la tarea teológica a partir de la praxis de la construcción de una nueva sociedad,” 11. (italics mine) The influence of dependency theories on the articulation of liberation theologies in Latin America is well documented. Although not all dependency theorists employed Marxist analytical frameworks to devise their views, the contributions of (neo)Marxist thinkers, such as André Gunder Frank, Theotonio dos Santos, Ruy Mauro Marini, and others were central to the emergence of the theological language of liberation in Latin America. See
Theologians such as Míguez Bonino recognized (in the mid-1970s) the relevance of Marxist socioeconomic and political theories, their ideological projections for guiding the revolutionary praxis of liberation, and potential for testing in practice its effectiveness in correspondence to the gospel’s demands. On the one hand, Míguez Bonino claimed categorically, “no revolutionary movement can exempt itself from Marxist analysis and ideology.” On the other hand, such acknowledgment did not lead him and others to incorporate uncritically orthodox Marxist theoretical concepts and ideological views into their theological reflections. Míguez Bonino, for example, argued that the new forms the world capitalist system was adopting at the time through its multinational monopolistic expressions, and the ways in which culture and religion were instrumental to the struggle for liberation required going beyond classical Marxist elaborations. In other words, he claimed that even though Marxist traditions revealed some important aspects of past social order, they must be revised to take account of the changing world capitalist system. He also called the attention to the dimensions, dynamics, and processes that were left out classical strands of Marxism. Moreover, he pointed out that among popular sectors in Latin America there was a general opposition to adopting the existing socialist versions, even the Cuban system. Instead, people felt the need to find their own way of building an autochthonous socialism, which responded to real

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Assmann, *Practical Theology of Liberation*, 49–50, 116–17, 130; See also Dussel, “Teología de la liberación y marxismo,” 125.

131Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology*, 99–100. I choose to mention Míguez Bonino because, among liberation theologians, he authored perhaps the most thorough and refined work on the relationships between Marxists and Christians in Latin America. He clearly demonstrated why liberation theologians’ decision to adopt a ‘selective’ stand regarding Marxist theoretical and ideological views was not an arbitrary methodological option. See José Míguez Bonino, *Christians and Marxists: The Mutual Challenge to Revolution* (London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976).


133Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology*, 35.
needs of the peoples of the region, and their histories and cultures.  

While greatly appreciative of some Marxist socio-analytical perspectives from the 1970s and 1980s, some liberation theologians criticized their Eurocentric, universalizing, and dogmatic theoretical/epistemological formulations, and the authoritarian, bureaucratic, and in some cases oppressive structures and institutional practices in some of these socialist societies. Arce’s views of Marxism-Leninism lacked this type of critical introspection. His approach was less nuanced than other liberation theologians’, especially Míguez Bonino’s. Missing in Arce’s publications is a detailed analysis of how the “official” Marxism-Leninism in Cuba differed from other expressions of socialism (Soviet Union, China, and African revolutionary movements). When he spoke of Marxism-Leninism, either as a system of socioeconomic and political theories, or ideology, or a social system, he used very general and vague terms, as if he were talking about a single coherent theoretical frame, ideological current and monolithic social system.

**The Prophetic Character of Marxist Atheism**

As pointed out in chapter two, already in 1965, Arce advanced what he saw as the prophetic significance of Marxist-Leninist atheism for the Cuban church, from a concrete praxis of social transformation, and not from an exclusively theoretical or intellectual perspective. He

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134Ibid., 40. Like Arce, on occasions Míguez Bonino also fell into ambiguities and over-generalizations when speaking about “socialism” and “capitalism.” Although in some places he acknowledged the complexity of those “social systems” in terms of their multiple ways of getting materialized, sometimes his formulations tended toward oversimplification. For instance, while speaking of a historical project of liberation that take into account the social conditions of the continent, he pointed out the need of constructing a “socialist system,” in the singular. It was not that he did not recognize the socio-historical, economic, political, and ethnic-cultural differences between the countries and peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean. As a matter of fact, he was well aware of the plurality of views and conceptions of historical projects of liberation among Latin American revolutionaries. Yet, he noted that one of the consequences of such diversity of positions was the atomization of the practices of liberation, with the dilution of their possibilities of success (Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology*, 40–41).

135Assmann’s sympathetic approach to specific Marxist social analyses concerning dependency theory did not prevent him from offering strong criticisms of many strands of orthodox Marxism, among other things, because of their incapacity to understand the particular features of Latin American social realities. Assmann, *Practical Theology of Liberation*, 140. See also Míguez Bonino’s critical comments on traditional Marxist and Marxist-Leninist political, ideological, and epistemological practices and theoretical views in his *Christians and Marxists*, 80–81, 89–91, 91–101, 124, 132.
Arce’s theological interpretation of the prophetic character of “Marxist atheism” must be understood in the context of his critiques of the capitalist economic logic, the religious ideology that sacralizes it, and the metaphysical negation of religion promoted by “scientific” atheism. He argued that, seeing the atheistic critique of religion in metaphysical terms was a mistake. “Atheism,” as a historical and cultural phenomenon, correlates dialectically to historically diverse expressions of theism. Just as “writing the history of atheism is writing the history of the critique of religion,” so also the biblical revelation should be understood as a history of the critique of idolatry. In light of this, he established a distinction between a-theism and a-theoism.

By a-theism Arce understood an essentialist philosophical position, which conceptually denies God’s existence. He wrote, “the negation of God in contemporary atheism has essentially meant the rejection of a God whose existence is claimed to be another idea and, at best, the only idea.” Atheism, in this sense, does not have to do with denying the existence of

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136 Arce, “The Mission of the Church,” 46. The same idea appears in the 1977 Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Cuba: “The Church teaches that the ‘atheism’ of the ideology sustained by the Socialist revolution, makes more clearly evident the atheism of the ‘believers’ who are not capable of ‘discerning’ the signs of the times in the midst of the new society being constructed human being. The most important thing, in this case is that the atheist-communists serve as an inspiration to us because of their readiness and willingness to live sacrificially their efficacious love in solidarity to others.” (3.E.03). Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Cuba, Confession of Faith (1977) of the Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Cuba, 21–22.

137 In the early 1970s, the leaders of the revolutionary government adopted “scientific” atheism as one of the ideological tenets of its Marxist-Leninist platform. In 1976, they instituted it as a constitutional principle of the Cuban estate.


139 While seemingly referring to atheism as a single philosophical position regarding God’s existence, he was careful enough to acknowledge that “not all the contemporary forms of atheism are alike, nor do they have the same motivation, or an identical cultural, ideological, sociological, or psychologically interpreted etiology” (Arce, “Theology and Contemporary Atheism,” 101).

140 Arce, “Theology and Contemporary Atheism,” 117.
the living God, but with rejecting a “conceptual idol.”\textsuperscript{141} Arce refused to speak of God’s “existence” in terms of an “idea” or “being” that ex-ists “outside” or “beyond” the human reality in all its complexity. Instead, he said, God “in-sists” as “relationship” “inside” the whole complexity of the human reality.\textsuperscript{142} “God is not an object of theoretical discussion, philosophical analysis, or metaphysical speculation; instead, God is a ... reality to be or not experienced.”\textsuperscript{143} Thus, for him, both Christians and Marxists must be \textit{a-theist}, because “the Marxist does not believe in the idea of God, and the Christian does not believe that God is just an idea.”\textsuperscript{144}

For Arce, \textit{a-theism} is more an ethical than a philosophical question. It refers to the denial of God’s existence, not from a theoretical point of view but from a practical one. According to him, “it is the atheism of the person who renounces the faith as love of neighbor. It is the atheism of injustice, of the one who says in his ‘heart’: ‘there is no God.’ It is the atheism of imperialist capitalism.”\textsuperscript{145} \textit{A-theist} is one who “does not effectively practice love” by exerting the “distributive justice.” That is what the Psalmist meant by writing: “The impious fool says in his heart, ‘there is no God’ (Psalm 14:1).

\begin{itemize}
\item To the Psalmist, this has a concrete and practical socio-economic and political meaning. The atheism referred to by the Psalmist is what the Psalmist himself calls ‘corruption,’ making things ‘abominable,’ not doing ‘good,’ ‘exploiting’ the people, practicing ‘injustice,’ and forgetting the ‘oppressed.’ It is not a matter of saying ‘there is no God’ with one’s head or one’s ‘loins.’ It is a matter of ‘devouring the people like bread.’ It is the atheism of every oppressor and exploiter of human beings. To the Psalmist, this atheism is very widespread, especially among those who ‘invoke’ a god and not a God; for God is in those who do justice and free the people from oppression, as the Psalmist says.\textsuperscript{146}
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{142} Arce, “Teología en Revolución: Caracterización de un quehacer teológico en Cuba revolucionaria,” 66.
\textsuperscript{144} Arce, “Teología en Revolución,” 65.
\textsuperscript{145} Arce, “Theology and Contemporary Atheism,” 103.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 101.
Arce added that there is significant difference between refusing to accept intellectually the “existence” of God and denying God’s presence in the world by creating social structures and relations that perpetuate poverty, injustice, oppression, and marginalization. The a-theo-ist does not deny God with the “head” but with the “heart,” in participating in and obtaining benefits from unjust relationships with other individuals and creatures. It is in this sense that Arce exposed the a-theoistic nature of capitalism, as its cultural-religious ethos.

Capitalist society is bent on producing a human being whose primary interest is living, working, and dying concentrated only on self; in other words, essentially a sinner, described by Luther as someone ‘turned in upon self.’ In this type of society, love proves to be only a commandment. The church, in the name of the Sunday-God, preaches ‘love one another;’ but the Monday-God necessitates hating, competing with, and deceiving one’s neighbor with ‘premeditation and treachery,’ and being forced by the need for survival to exploit and oppress that neighbor.\textsuperscript{147}

Arce contrasted the a-theoistic cultural ethos of capitalism to what was happening in Cuba during the first two decades of constructing socialism through a revolutionary social process with a Marxist-Leninist ideological inspiration:

The Marxist-Leninist [individual] may not go to church. The church, with its Sunday-God and its commandment of love, may appear to that person as the greatest hypocrisy, the big lie, the colossal deception. The Monday-God forces that person to love, to live in shared militant solidarity with others, and to liberate oppressed fellow human beings. Love becomes for that person a social law, for every day of the week, requiring a struggle on behalf of a ‘kingdom’ of human beings wherein justice and peace prevail.\textsuperscript{148}

And he added:

The same socialist society that is being built ..., with its liberating politico-economic structures, its egalitarian cultural-ideological ethos, and its human socio-spiritual values, capacitates [or prepares] the individual ... (certainly unconsciously), but in a decisive and liberating manner, ... to know God, the God of biblical revelation, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of love.\textsuperscript{149}

\textsuperscript{147}Ibid., 104.
\textsuperscript{148}Ibid., 105.
\textsuperscript{149}Ibid., 105–06.
Arce concluded that the faith of the revolutionary Christian and Marxist’s a-theism coincides at the point in which both say no to the idols created by those who seek to satisfy their own social, economic, and political interests and “eat up people as they eat bread (Psalm 14: 4).” Emphasizing this point of commonality was crucial to encouraging the participation of a shrinking group of Christians to join other sectors of the population in the construction of a socialist society in Cuba.150

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that Arce’s theological reflections were responses to the sociopolitical climate of the Cuban revolutionary process. Unique in certain important ways, his perspectives also converge with the perspectives of other liberation theologians, e.g., the emphasis on the situation of the dependency by the Latin American countries, need for liberation, the theological claims concerning the God of the poor, option for the poor and oppressed, and the need to deideologize the Christian faith and the gospel. As other liberation theologians did, Arce also saw the historical and integral character of salvation/liberation, and his theology displayed profound anticapitalist and anti-imperialist attitudes. Nevertheless, while sharing many of their intuitions, he also forged different paths in wrestling with the realities of construction of a socialist society. He chided other liberation theologians for neglecting the concrete experience of “revolution” and for failing to fully embrace Marxist-Leninist ideology. His radical adoption and interpretation of the socialist project and of the Marxist-Leninist ideology as coinciding with the gospel message, and his reclamation of the prophetic character of “Marxist atheism” set him apart from other liberation scholars. Even so, although he did not make it significantly explicit, the notion of the reign of God permeates his theological reflective work.

150 Míguez Bonino, Christians and Marxists, 23, 27.
In this chapter, I have placed Arce in conversation with key contemporary first generation liberation theologians, mainly Míguez Bonino, Assmann, and Gutiérrez. In doing so, I have shown more concretely some points of agreement and disagreement between Arce and these scholars. In highlighting some of his most unique–even ground breaking–insights as they were born out of the Cuban sociopolitical reality of his time, I have explored some of his most significant contributions. In the next two chapters, in light of his work and today’s shifting theological-social-political-economic landscapes, I will seek to outline new ways for interpreting the Christian faith and the mission of the church in the contemporary Cuban context, and what they might contribute in the Latin American context especially.
Chapter 4

Cuba and the Global Context since the 1990s:
New Challenges, Voices, and Theoretical Developments

Introduction

Since Arce published his major contributions, Cuba, Latin America, and the world have all significantly changed.\(^1\) Debates on the character of these changes haunt every discussion in the church and society today about the future. I divide this chapter in two sections. In the first part of the chapter, drawing on Cuban and other sources which are prominent in these discussions, I sketch the horizons and central points of reference in current debates. My intention is to note in broad brush strokes the dynamic profound changes taking place all over the world, many of which are impacting deeply Latin America and Cuba more specifically. In light of these changes I, then, sketch the general social, economic, and political strategies adopted by the Cuban government to respond to these global challenges, which are contributing to the partial re-insertion of the country within globalized capitalist networks, among other effects. These strategies involve new risks and challenges for the continuation of the present socialist project—although fundamentally changed in the decades since its inception —and its improvement toward the construction of possible social, political, and economic alternatives. I will draw on significant Cuban voices and other commentators broadly sympathetic to, if sometimes also critical of, the Cuban revolutionary experiment, and of current efforts to forge an alternative path to development. Of course, debates have evolved since 1959, with many “new” voices joining in, women, African descendants, LGBQT, raising their own questions, challenges, interests, and

\(^1\)Along the multiple and complex changes that have taken place, the character of the debates about these changes has also changed radically. With the inclusion of so many new movements/voices, standpoints, and perspectives, drawing on the broader ranges of traditions and cultures of other places and peoples, and the development of new media of communication, critical dialogues have broadened across “difference” radically expanding inventories of new insights and questions, categories, theoretical frameworks and epistemological horizons.
strategies to interpret and transform social reality. These voices mark both the expansion of debates and a further problematization of earlier “officialist” positions and practical political orientations, including in particular “Marxist-Leninist” theoretical frames. To provide a full treatment of the world’s and Cuba’s complex and challenging changes and shifts at every social level goes well beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, I will sketch the outlines of evolving frameworks of debate on our profoundly changing context, and the challenges and possibilities confronting Cubans today. This is necessary for a (re)contextualization of Cuban theology today, and for developing a balanced appreciation of the contributions but also the limits of Arce’s theology in confronting these challenges, which will be the focus of the next chapter.

The second (and smaller) part of this chapter is primarily theological in content. My purpose is to sketch the renewed and expanding theoretical framework emerging in Latin American and Latino/a liberationist theologies, which provides the framework for this dissertation as a whole, and for the weighing of Sergio Arce’s legacy, and, in particular, its continuing inspiration in addressing the challenges confronting Cubans today. In a last section, I broadly explore the theoretical import of the decolonial perspective forged in the late 1990s-2000s by Latin American and Latino/a scholars. They build on the insights of the dependency theorists of the 1960s and 1970s, liberation theologies and philosophies, incorporating the perspectives of “new” social movements (indigenous, women, LGBQT, African descendants, environmentalists).

I highlight how decolonial thought contributes to the reinvention and reframing of theological categories such as “oppression” and “liberation,” developments which are relevant for the Latin American context and Cuba. As I will show, the import of decoloniality relates to its critical unmasking and rethinking of the complex colonizing power matrix, its insistence on
delinking the Latin American intellectual tradition from Eurocentric structures of knowledge, and its adamant reclamation and incorporation of the multiple voices, traditions, epistemologies, spiritualities that have been silenced and that in many ways remain absent from mainstream debates. These and other aspects I will discuss as they relate more specifically to liberation theologians, Sergio Arce and the present Cuban context.

In my judgment the decolonial perspective represents a continuation today of the same critical and hopeful spirit that inspired Arce and the first generation of liberation theologians. As I show, there are many incipient expressions of this “decolonial” perspective in discussions within the Cuban churches today. This framework provides an updated basis for critically evaluating and renewing Arce’s theological framework. Again, a detailed discussion of the diversification of theological subjects that fall within the liberationist camp and theoretical debates on decolonialism falls outside the reach of this dissertation. By noting this proliferation of voices and intellectual currents, I seek to show how over time liberation debates have become broader and more complex in terms of interconnected concerns, subjects, and conditions of oppression.

Cuba and the Challenges of the New Global Scene

1. Panoramic Changes in the World Context

In the view of many critical scholars, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of ‘socialism’ in Eastern European countries in the early 1990s revealed the depth of the internal crises of these particular social configurations, and especially the deterioration of their political-ideological structures. As early as 1993, Helio Gallardo and other scholars were

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2 For Helio Gallardo, for example, these historical events constituted the “crisis de acabamiento por liquidación.” In particular, Gallardo distinguished between the “crisis de liquidación” of both Marxism-Leninism as ideology and the Soviet system of domination, which includes the collapse of the structures and institutions that determined the system’s functioning and reproduction, and the ‘crisis as transition’ of ‘Marxism’ and ‘socialism,’ understood both as historical movements/processes of social interlocution and transformation, which are not limited to any of their
convinced that the crises of Soviet-style socialisms also had external forces that contributed to their demise. They argued that those crises cannot be seen separately from the larger more encompassing global crisis, which is also related to the expansion of the neoliberal capitalist economic model of free market, and its devastating social, political and environmental consequences for the majority of the world’s population.  

The reconfiguration of the economic and political world order and the wide acceptance by many national governments (in Asia, Africa and Latin America, as well as Europe and North America) of the economic policies mandated by the financial institutions that took part in the so-called Washington Consensus, made “capitalism” seem triumphant; in the eyes of many critics, though, such triumph was a mirage. The magnitude of the debacle of the Socialist Bloc eclipsed the crisis of globalized capitalism and its causes. Many of these critical social analysts argue that, the capitalist world system is not viable in the long run. In order to guarantee its reproduction, neoliberal projects for “capitalist” growth and expansion accelerate the destruction of nature and particular historical actualizations. He rejected the attempts to identify the crisis of liquidation of specific historical socioeconomic and political configurations (in this case, the Central and Eastern European Marxist-Leninist socialist states) with the effects of that crisis on other practical and theoretical articulations of ‘Marxist socialism.’ For him, the “crisis of historical socialism” in terms of critical discernment and transition, did not necessarily mean the unviability of “socialism(s)” as historical projects, or the total unreliability of Marxist socio-analytical theories. Helio Gallardo, “La crisis del socialismo histórico y América Latina,” Pasos, no. 39 (January-February 1992): 11–30. And some, like Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, have called for a renewed 21st century socialism. These voices are very influential in Cuba today. At the same time, other voices, still fewer and more marginal in Cuba, argue that, even in its best expressions, the discourses of “socialism” are too limited to address the range of challenges today, and that the future must be both post-capitalist and post-socialist.

According to Gallardo, la crisis del socialismo histórico se inscribe, reforzándola, en una crisis más global, de civilización, cuyo núcleo dinamizador es el modelo de crecimiento económico de los países industriales y postindustriales capitalistas y su tendencia a la absolutización del mercado como institución en la que se constituye y resuelve la naturaleza humana; los efectos más palpables de esta crisis de civilización se muestran en los irreversibles procesos de deterioro ambiental ligados al modelo económico (productivo-destructivo), a sus prolongaciones en la configuración social (polarización incluidos/excluidos) y en las inaceptables relaciones entre concentraciones demográficas y ritmos de crecimiento poblacional y disponibilidad de recursos productivos.” Helio Gallardo, “Elementos para una discusión de la izquierda política en América Latina,” Pasos, no. 50 (November-December 1993): 42.

the exclusion of vast sectors of the world’s population (mainly from the poorer nations), which do not figure prominently in the calculus of capitalist expansion, consumption and production. Despite its growing choruses of critics, the 1990s was characterized by the triumph of the project of neoliberal globalization in centers of power around the world, with its economic policies of privatization, liberalization of economy, deregulation of financial markets, structural adjustments (cutting social programs), and the subordination of the nation-states to the interest of large corporations.

By the end of the decade, the disastrous effects of this process of neoliberal globalization were increasingly evident all over the world. While all people/countries were deeply affected and transformed, gaps between rich and poor expanded, and the poor suffered most. During the 1990s many Latin American governments accepted the neoliberal economic prescriptions by international financial organizations such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and implemented policies of structural socioeconomic adjustments with detrimental consequences for the peoples of the region. With the adoption of neoliberal measures and their impact on the general population, the capacity of the national elites to speak

7 Ramonet notes that, while initially effective, from a macroeconomic viewpoint the policies of structural adjustment could not contain the effects of the financial crisis of the late 1990s (1997-1998), and much less hide its high social costs in terms of the exponential increase of poverty, social inequality and violence, particularly in the southern countries. Ramonet, “Impacto de la globalización en los países en desarrollo”.
8 Beatriz Stolowicz points out that, in all its “modern” history, it was in the 1990s that the region suffered the greatest levels of exploitation internally and from the centers of the capitalist world system. Just in terms of the interest owed on the external debt, she notes, Latin American countries paid (between 1992 and 2001) more than 1.22 billion dollars to their creditors. Shamefully, in 2001 these countries (basically the poorest sectors and working and middle classes) gave back to international financial institutions and rich countries six dollars per every dollar received toward overcoming poverty. Beatriz Stolowicz, La izquierda latinoamericana: gobierno y proyecto de cambio, Transnational Institute, Briefing Series No.1 (Madrid: Fundación de Investigaciones Marxistas, 2004), 5.
for and represent the interests of the diverse popular sectors and ethnic-cultural groups was also weakened. But by the beginning of the twentieth century the sociopolitical panorama of Latin America was changing, due to the deepening of the socio-economic and political crises, the failure of the neoliberal policies, the lack of credibility of the liberal democratic political systems and “right-wing” governments. And over the course of the 1990s a new wave of diverse popular and social movements had erupted giving voice to these discontents, and also challenging more traditional “left-wing” political forces. By the end of the decade, in the view of many commentators, a new political environment had also emerged; left-leaning political alliances and parties were created, winning many electoral victories. At the center of this reconfiguration of the sociopolitical landscape has been the revitalization-resurgence-emergence of multiple popular, indigenous, and social movements and organizations and their connection to intercontinental networks of anti-capitalist globalization movements, e.g., the World Social Forum.

In the views of growing numbers of people, the irruption of this wide range of grassroots social movements, political forces, and strategic alliances was a response to the crisis of the neoliberal capitalist projects and to the crisis of traditional Latin American left-wing movements and political parties as well. The collapse of Marxism-Leninism as alternative ideology had both negative and positive repercussions for Latin American popular movements and left political organizations, some of which had emerged during the 1970s and were strongly influenced by

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Marxist theoretical and ideological frameworks. As these theories and frameworks appeared to be inadequate to analyze the social, economic and political situation, and to forge a political strategy to guide the struggles for liberation, those movements and organizations were now forced to rethink their objectives, visions, and strategies. Positively, the political crises created new spaces for reconfiguring popular movements and organizations as they creatively assumed the historical-cultural complexity and plurality of Latin American individual and collective social actors and their struggles. In particular, left-wing groups with Marxist and Marxist-Leninist orientations tended to frame social reality in terms of structures, which led them to underestimate “religion” and “culture” more generally, as well as the creativity and agency of poor and working class people (and women in particular), the importance of *lo cotidiano* (daily life) as space of alternative sociopolitical practices, and the specific forms of social suffering of different segments of the population (women, indigenous, Afrodescendants, youth, etc.).

From the 1990s up to our present it has become evident that the sociopolitical topography of Latin America has become far more complex, fluid, diverse, and dynamic than imagined in earlier dualist or binary frameworks that divided the world into opposing political and economic “blocs.” In the works of many commentators and activists there is greater awareness of changeability in sociopolitical factors, agents, and points of exchange, which makes their work far more complicated, and makes traditional categories and frameworks less useful in understanding them. The demands for alternative social projects are beginning to take impetus, leaving behind the dualistic frameworks of earlier years. In some Latin American nations,

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12 According to Gallardo, in traditional left frameworks these peoples “were homogenized as *masa movilizable* or as *caudal electoral* without particular attention, political understanding about their specific levels of asymmetry, or attention to the specific processes of configuration of their identities” (Translation mine) (Gallardo, “Elementos para una discusión de la izquierda política en América Latina,” 39–40). Gallardo ascribed this homogenizing understanding of popular political participation to the schematism derived from the formula of the “avant-garde (the party) and the masses” suggested by Marxist-Leninists as the nucleus of all revolutionary popular political activity. Gallardo, “Elementos para una discusión de la izquierda política en América Latina,” 41.
popular movements, political parties, and governments have engaged in integrationist efforts as responses to the new economic and sociopolitical context in the world and its challenges (ALBA, UNASUR, CELAC, etc.). The upsurge of progressive governments has also meant at once the retrenchment and reconstitution of right-leaning political sectors, agitating to seize power again.\textsuperscript{13}

**Cuba’s Reform, Re-creation, and Re-insertion into the Global Scene**

1. **The sociopolitical and economic dimensions**

   Cubans were deeply impacted by the collapse of socialist bloc, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the conditions of the new world political-economic order. If one takes into account that Cuba developed eighty five percent of its trade with the former socialist countries, through the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), and that transactions were almost entirely in nonconvertible currency, a profound economic crisis was inevitable as it lost its main trade and financial partners.\textsuperscript{14} Increasingly, Cuba’s economy became subjected to the dynamics of world market forces, which were not favorable to Cuba’s economic situation (or that of any other poor country).\textsuperscript{15} As a strategy to confront Cuba’s deteriorating economic conditions, the government forged a program of adjustment: cuts of budgets and expenditures at all levels, reduction of services (electricity, transportation), temporary shutdown of industries, relocation of bureaucratic personnel into productive tasks in agriculture, and further rationing of products and consumer goods. However, at the same time, as some commentators note, during the 1990s the government made sustained efforts to continue providing universal health care and education,

\textsuperscript{13} Some of the cases worth noting are: the attempted coup against Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 2002, the coup attempt against Rafael Correa in Ecuador in 2010, and the actual overthrow of Manuel Zelaya in Honduras in 2009. These have been orchestrated by groups associated with the national oligarchy.


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 293.
although “the quality of these services severely deteriorated.”16 Hence, some scholars refer to this set of economic measures as a program of adjustment without de-socialization.17

But these austerity measures were not sufficient to tackle the deep economic crisis. The government developed a new set of responses, centered around “moderate” market-oriented reforms, such as: decriminalizing dollar possession and authorizing hard currency transactions in the local economy; legalizing self-employment in a limited number of activities; liberalizing agricultural cooperatives; introducing a tax system; encouraging foreign investments through joint venture and profit-sharing enterprises, mainly in tourism; and also establishing free trade and manufacturing zones.18 While promoted with the goal of saving the revolution, some critics in Cuba have called attention to the re-stratifying effects of these economic reforms in Cuban society, and their connections to the emergence and worsening of other social problems and

16 Carmelo Mesa-Lago, “Social Policy and Social Welfare,” in Looking Forward: Comparative Perspectives on Cuba’s Transition, ed. Marifeli Pérez-Stable (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 194; Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, 296. Pérez points out that in 1997, Cuba’s infant mortality rate was 7.2 per 1,000, and it “remained the lowest in Latin America and among the lowest in the world” (Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, 296).


18 Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, 305-12; Jorge F. Pérez-López, “Strategy for a Cuban Economic Transition,” in Looking Forward: Comparative Perspectives on Cuba’s Transition, ed. Marifeli Pérez-Stable (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 171-75; Marifeli Pérez-Stable, The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Course, and Legacy (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 132-33. Some commentators note that, in contrast to the political-economic reforms implemented by former Eastern and Central European socialist countries, and in a lesser degree, China and Vietnam, these economic measures were modest and incomplete. Pérez-López, “Strategy for a Cuban Economic Transition,” 163-64; Marifeli Pérez-Stable, The Cuban Revolution, 132–33. Carmelo Mesa-Lago argues that in comparison to those socialist and former socialist countries that undertook full restructuring, the effects of Cuba’s minimalistic and incomplete reforms on social welfare policies were less harmful. He recognizes, nonetheless, that social welfare indicators (health care, education, social security, etc.) have not reached levels prior to 1989, and he notes that deepening market-oriented economic reforms will be translated into a further significant deterioration of those indicators. Mesa-Lago, “Social Policy and Social Welfare,” 194–95. Farber points out that the Cuban government made significant efforts to maintain levels of social welfare similar to those existing prior to the crisis of the 1990s. He reports that until recently the government has spent approximately one-third of the country’s GDP, which is highest proportion in Latin America. But, he also says, “the lack of economic growth inevitably impacts the state’s ability to continue funding [the Cuban government’s] social policies.” Samuel Farber, Cuba since the Revolution of 1959. A Critical Assessment (Chicago.IL: Haymarket Books, 2011), 72–74.
conflicts. The generalized “urgency” associated with the acquisition of hard currency has contributed—up to the present—to a significant rise of social ills such as crime, prostitution, and corruption.

Measured by conventional indicators, the Cuban economy slightly recovered during the last part of the 1990s. In particular, this modest recovery was supported by the emergence of Hugo Chavez’ Venezuela as Cuba’s discounted oil provider, as an important trade partner, and source of financial credit, along with China. In that new context, the leadership of the government decided to restrict and even reverse some of the economic measures and reforms implemented earlier to face the crisis. Officials put in place a new series of regulations, heavy taxes, and restrictions on self-employment, small business, joint ventures, and foreign investments. The government promoted a new phase of recentralizing “economic decision-making and further [restricting] the small private sector.” Some analysts saw these centralizing

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19Luisa Iñiguez-Rojas and Omar Everleny Pérez-Villanueva, comps., Heterogeneidad social en la Cuba actual (La Habana, Cuba: Centros de Estudio de Salud y Bienestar Humano, Universidad de la Habana, 2004). Many scholars agree in highlighting the role played by the “dollarization” of the economy in the process of class reconfiguration and the re-stratification of the Cuban society. The place individuals came to occupy in the social scale begun to be determined in an important way by their access to hard currency (or its equivalent in Cuban convertible pesos after 2004) whether through remittances from abroad, by working at joint ventures enterprises, by way of the tourist sector, or through black market transactions. While most people working in the public sector are paid in pesos, those working in the private sector, and state high-priority and joint venture enterprises (tourism, oil, and nickel industry) are likely to receive part of their profits, salaries, bonuses, and tips in hard currency. This helps explain the massive exodus of many professionals (engineers, medical doctors, scientists, and teachers) to the tourism industry and the emergent private sphere. Regarding income disparity, Pérez reports that by the late 1990s, “the estimated income disparity between the highest paid and the lowest paid had increased from 4:1 to 25:1” (Pérez, Cuba between Reform and Revolution, 312). Farber notes that “besides creating significant inequality, the two-tier economy of hard currency and pesos has also generated serious distortions in the labor market” (Farber, Cuba Since the Revolution of 1959, 86). Mayra Espina mentions some of the most direct consequences of those distortions: decrease of the importance of work in general as a manner of providing income and welfare, especially in the state sector; weakening of the role of salary; and increasing appearance of illegal but efficient ways to obtain income. Mayra Espina, “Reestratificación y desigualdad,” in Luisa Iñiguez-Rojas and Omar Everleny Pérez-Villanueva, comps., Heterogeneidad en la Cuba actual, 22.


21Carmelo Mesa-Lago, The Cuban Economy: Salvation or Damnation? (Miami, FLA: Miami Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies/Cuba Transition Project, 2005), 25. Quoted by Aviva Chomsky, A History of the Cuban Revolution (West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 177. One concrete expression of this new strategy was the de-dollarization that took place in 2004, when government leaders introduced the “convertible peso” as the official hard-currency for businesses transactions. While people could carry U.S. dollars and other foreign hard-currency, the transactions (shopping) must be done in Cuban convertible pesos. According to some scholars, with
measures as a government’s attempt to keep control of the dynamic emergent sectors of the economy.

Then the Cuban economy was hit by the most serious world recession in many decades. Along with the replacement of Fidel Castro by Raúl Castro as the head of the Cuban government in 2006, a new series of economic measures was developed as a response to the new crisis. But these did not improve noticeably the economic situation. And in April 2011, the Communist party and the government approved a new set of economic reforms “updating” the economic model to avoid an economic and social debacle which would definitively undermine the government and the remaining threads of its (already much modified) socialist project. While relatively slow and limited, these reforms were aimed at re-energizing the economy by promoting the creation of jobs not directly related to the state (in the private sector and cooperatives) mainly in the area of services. The government’s agenda presupposes a significant

this measure the government sought to reduce the income gaps and inequalities between families operating in the peso economy and other people that somehow earn hard currency and/or receive remittances from abroad. Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution*, 178.


23Julia E. Sweig, *Cuba: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 207–16; Marifeli Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, 162–64. Some commentators saw these measures as hesitant, modest, and sometimes incoherent steps toward economic recovery. For many of these analysts, deeper state-decentralizing and private ownership-oriented economic reforms were needed in order to face Cuba’s economic critical situation. Other observers argued that, despite their limitations, these economic reforms had a significant impact, considering that they focused initially on consumer demands and eliminated long-standing restrictions (elimination of prohibition to purchase cell phones, computers, and other similar goods, to have access to hotels and other tourist facilities, and to lease idle lands, among other measures).

24The warning phrase of the president Raul Castro in his December 2010 speech was very eloquent: “We either rectify things or we run out of time to carry on skirting the abyss [and] we sink.” Quoted by Michael Reid, “Revolution in Retreat,” *The Economist*, March 24, 2012, 4.


26For that purpose, by the end of March of 2011 around half a million workers (approximately the 10 % of the labor force) from the state sector were little by little laid off, mainly from areas not linked directly to production. “From then on,” Farber points out, the “state was only going to hire people to work in those areas of the economy where historically there had been labor shortages, such as agriculture, construction, teaching, the police forces, and industry” (Farber, *Cuba since the Revolution of 1959*, 93). To facilitate the incorporation of those workers into new jobs, the government authorized 250 000 new licenses for self-employment; and the government officials projected that other 200 000 jobs would be created by converting state business into employee-run cooperatives. See Ibid., 93–
expansion of non-state sectors of the economy, with the potential of setting up thousands of new enterprises, the appearance of new capacities to organize and manage them, and the incorporation of a large number of workers. All these measures pursue to increase overall productivity in both public and private sectors without privatizing key sectors of the Cuban economy (oil, tourism, and mining, etc.).

Commentators point out that, while these reforms are intended to create new possibilities for entrepreneurship and creative private and cooperative initiatives, they may also provoke deepening uncertainty in people accustomed to dependence on the paternalist structures of the state.

From the perspective of the government and its supporters, such reforms are a necessary and irreversible strategy to preserve some basic principles of the Cuban revolutionary process, such as national sovereignty and basic levels of social equity and welfare. On the other hand, the government’s critics and detractors view it as a political move that seeks to preserve the present structures of power, while avoiding the implementation of much needed political reforms that can contribute to a more democratic and “open” society. And some observers think that it is too little too late, that the reforms are insufficient to prevent the inexorable collapse of the Cuban “socialist” economy given its deteriorating economic situation and of the government given its


28 As some commentators report, the reforms have already had negative consequences for a significant number of displaced workers and people in general. These massive layoffs “were to be accompanied by a withdrawal of subsidies to the population, including far less generous unemployment compensation for those who have lost their state jobs” (Farber, The Origins of the Cuban Revolution, 94). See also Marifeli Pérez-Stable, The Cuban Revolution, 165. In Farber’s view, the reforms announced by Raúl Castro and approved in the sixth Congress of the Communist Party, in addition to a substantial insecurity for the workers who will be laid off, “signifies a major retreat and shrinking of the Cuban welfare state” (Farber, The Origins of the Cuban Revolution, 277).

overall gerontocratic leadership. Some others even interpret the economic reforms as a clear sign that the “Revolution” or the “regime”—as some prefer to call it—is at an end, at the very least at a moment of transition toward something very different from what it has been up to now.

Clearly Cuba is at a crucial crossroads in its history. Heated debates about the revolution’s continuity and its legacy, and Cuba’s likely future scenarios are increasingly taking place inside and outside of the island. Christians and their churches—and members of other religious groups—confront these challenges as well. Two foci in the discussions are how to think theologically about historical transitions and the role of faith communities in nurturing national debates, solidarity, and commitments to a shared future.

2. Sociocultural (re)configurations

For many Cubans, including myself, it is especially important to start serious discussions about the future with appreciation for the “advances” made during the “revolutionary period.” At the same time, it is also increasingly clear that the revolutionary project in its various expressions

31 See Reid, “Revolution in Retreat.”
failed to address certain social challenges that persist even today. The crisis and the measures and reforms gradually implemented by the government to respond to it have shown that many of the social maladies that were believed to have been eradicated or significantly lessened were in fact still part of the cultural ethos and woven into the “socialist” political economy too, in terms of access to certain types of jobs, government positions, etc. In particular, racism, patriarchal structures and male chauvinism, and discrimination because of sexual orientation have withstood the test of time.

Concerning the question of race, Esteban Morales recently concludes that, “of all the social problems that the Revolution tackled since 1959, [it] may have been the theme on which there has been the least progress.”

Many scholars agree that even though social structural transformations of the revolutionary process brought about a significant decrease of social inequalities, racial disparities were not fully erased, in contrast to what has been often affirmed by the official political discourse. Of course, racism is a very complex phenomenon, and in Cuba’s case it has deep historical, cultural, and ideological roots and ramifications. In Morales’s words, “whites, blacks and mulattos/as did not start from the same place in taking advantages of the opportunities the Revolution provided.” This inequity of socioeconomic and cultural locations was one of the key factors for the permanence of socioeconomic, political, and cultural disparities between diverse ethnic groups during the revolutionary period, and also for the

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continuation, even reinforcement, of racial stereotypes and discrimination. In addition, the aspiration of the revolutionary leadership to promote the equality across the whole population and repeated celebrations of this ideal as an already accomplished fact helped to obscure the reality and the lack of concrete programs to recognize Cuba’s internal socio-cultural diversity, including racial differences, and to address inequalities. Racial stereotypes and discriminatory behaviors were interpreted as a leftover from the previous social system, a situation that would be eventually overcome in the process of building a classless, more egalitarian society. But, as some scholars note, this interpretive optic both prevented any serious public discussion of race in Cuban society, and also associated this issue with counterrevolutionary attempts to create divisions within the revolution. As a result, Afro-Cubans’ specific sociopolitical and racial concerns became subordinated to a more all-encompassing goal: the preservation of national unity and sovereignty, and the integrity of the revolutionary project of social justice and equality in the face of permanent external and internal threats to destroy it. “[I]n the name of ‘unity’,” says Farber, “blacks and mulattos were [and continue to be] asked to put aside their grievances. This meant that racial inequalities would be perpetuated.” He also points out that the continuing reality of powerlessness, disadvantage, and subordination of Afro-Cubans in many areas of life—a situation that worsened during the crisis of the 1990s and continues to the present—

37 Alejandro de la Fuente mentions the predominance of Afro-Cubans in the most populous and economically depressed areas and neighborhoods, their overwhelming presence among the inmate population, the low representation of Afro-Cubans in the media, and the widespread use of racist remarks among the population as manifestations of racial inequalities, discrimination and prejudices in Cuba today, and even before the 1990s. See his “Race, Culture, and Politics,” 139–40. Farber points out that Afro-Cubans are also disproportionately represented among the people associated to prostitution and other marginal activities, and black youth are far more likely to be subjected to police harassment and arrest. Farber, Cuba since the Revolution of 1959, 177.
38 Morales indicates the significant role played by the dominant dogmatic version of Marxism-Leninism with its almost exclusive class perspective and its inadequacy for seeing and analyzing social problems, thereby helping to turn the racial question into an invisible reality in Cuban society during the revolutionary period. Morales, Race in Cuba, 67.
39 de la Fuente, “Race, Culture, and Politics,” 140; Farber, Cuba since the Revolution of 1959, 179; Morales, Race in Cuba, 68–69.
40 Farber, Cuba since the Revolution of 1959, 180.
have fueled the resurgence of old and new racial prejudices and forms of discrimination. In this light, it is no wonder that antiracist discourses are proliferating in the public sphere. Afro-Cuban voices in arts, politics, and social sciences are increasingly condemning manifestations of racism in Cuban public and private life and insisting that their voices be heard and their needs/demands taken in consideration in the process of (re)constructing the project of nation.

Concerning gender/women issues, many commentators point out that overall the social transformations impelled by the revolution’s leadership were translated into important gains for women in terms of their integration to the public sphere through their massive participation in the country’s productive life, education, and other social projects. The state provided numerous social services and programs to support working mothers and promote their equal participation in public life. In this respect it is also important to mention Cuban women’s legislative and political gains in terms of women’s rights and gender equality as recognized by the nation’s

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41Farber claims that the re-emergence of these “new” forms of racial prejudices and discrimination are also the result of the economic measures and reforms taken by the government to face and resolve some socioeconomic difficulties accentuated by the Special Period. See his *Cuba since the Revolution of 1959*, 176–77. Some commentators highlight the impact of Afro Cubans’ under-representation in the tourist industry and the unbalanced reception of remittances from abroad between whites and blacks (and mulattos/as) on the increasing socioeconomic-racial gap in the current Cuban society. The latter is especially important taking into consideration that the racial composition of Cuban emigration is overwhelmingly white, and that it is also more economically affluent than the black and racially mixed emigrated population. These economic inequalities are also significantly shaped by U.S. racial dynamics. See Robert D. Cruz, “The Industry Composition of Product on and the Distribution of Income by Race and Ethnicity in Miami,” in *The Review of Regional Studies* 21, no. 2 (1991): 153-69, http://journal.srsa.org/ojs/index.php/RRS/issue/view/212 (accessed November 14, 2014). Many observers agree that this situation will have a decisive weight in the socioeconomic, political, and ethnic-cultural configuration of a post Castro Cuba. See de la Fuente, “Race, Culture, and Politics,” 141–43.

42Examples of these racially explicit critical voices and sociocultural and political organizations (some of them are illegal) are rappers, the Cofradía de la Negritud, and Movimiento de Integración Racial “Juan Gualberto Gómez.” See de la Fuente, “Race, Culture, and Politics,” 155–58; Sujatha Fernandes, *Cuba Represent! Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).


44As examples of these social programs Htun mentions the creation of “a network of day care centers, maternity leave, school lunches, free education at all levels, and high-quality public health, including attention to women’s health and family planning.” (Htun, “Gender Equality in Transition Policies,” 131). For his part, Farber argues that massive mobilization of women as a significant labor force was part of the revolutionary government’s strategy for economic development. Farber, *Cuba since the Revolution of 1959*, 191.
Constitution and the Family Code Law, sanctioned in 1975. This situation is also a consequence of women’s participation in political decision making processes—as part of affirmative actions endorsed by the Cuban government and the Communist party leadership.

However, despite all these formal achievements, sexism continues to be a component of Cuban society’s dynamics as prejudices and obstacles to women’s egalitarian participation, well-being and leadership remain in many areas of the Cuban society. The theory of gender emancipation mainly through women’s participation in public life and work has proved to be flawed. Manifestations of gender hierarchies, discrimination, and oppression prevail in many instances of Cuba’s everyday life, and recurrent expressions of oppression such as domestic and sexual violence against women are still mostly unaddressed by the academia, mass media, and state political organizations. Moreover, with the crisis and the economic reforms, this reality has become more severe. Scarcity, economic and social marginalization of important sectors of the population, the growth of foreign tourism and, concomitantly, of mainly female prostitution have been instrumental to the increase of women’s inequality and oppression. Demands for gender liberation and political participation in ways different from those provided by the state have been voiced since the 1990s by women’s groups and organizations outside the Cuban

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46 Htun, “Gender Equality in Transition Policies,” 131; Alvarez, “Mujer y poderen Cuba.” Both authors highlight the role played by the Cuban Women Federation (FMC) on promoting women’s equal participation in the revolutionary process including the decision making instances. However, Htun also points out that the close ties of this organization to the state and the Communist Party have inhibited its critical capacity regarding state policies that affect women, and restrained the emergence of alternative visions and strategies of political participation and women’s emancipation. Htun, “Gender Equality in Transition Policies,” 135–36. See also Farber, Cuba since the Revolution of 1959, 192.  
47 Some commentators note that despite the official propaganda about gender equality and the exhortations of the Family Code, surveys show that gender unbalance regarding domestic duties still persist in most Cuban households. Women perform the overwhelming share of those duties, a situation that is commonly accepted as “normal” (the way things are) and therefore, reproduced and reinforced from generations to generations. Natividad Guerrero, “Género y diversidad: desigualdad, prejuicios y orientación sexual en Cuba,” Temas, no. 14 (April-June 1998): 40. Htun, “Gender Equality in Transition Policies,” 132–33.  
Women Federation. Although contained or silenced—depending on the scope of their political agendas and funding sources—these voices and organizations play an important role in calling society to pay attention to conditions of gender inequality, discrimination and oppression, their causes, and the ways in which these specific situations intersect other oppressive and marginalizing social structures, dynamics, and behaviors in the Cuban current context.

One example of these intersecting discriminatory realities is the prevalence of homophobic and heterosexist attitudes and practices in the Cuban society. In spite of the very recent state’s campaigns against homophobia, and increasing levels of tolerance toward homosexuality, homosexuals continue to be objects of mockery, discrimination, and marginalization. Along with racism and androcentrism, homophobia has a long history in Cuba, and it is hard to believe that its eradication will suddenly occur as a result of top-down educative and affirmative campaigns promoted by the state. This is especially true given that since the early years of the revolutionary process, and for almost three decades, homosexual practices and behaviors were officially deemed as antisocial conduct, incompatible with the

49One example of these independent organizations was MAGIN, a group founded in the early 1990s. See Sujatha Fernandes, "Gender, Representation, and Transnationalism: Developing Avenues of Feminist Activism in Contemporary Cuba," *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association* (Chicago, Ill, 2009), [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p61753_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p61753_index.html) (accessed November 12, 2014). A more recent group is the Ladies in White, a dissident organization comprised of wives, relatives, and other women supportive of political prisoners. Although being more political oriented, its agenda also includes gender and reclaims such as women participation in the country’s political life outside the official and permitted ways. See the website of this organization: [http://www.damasdeblanco.org](http://www.damasdeblanco.org) (accessed November 13, 2014)

50Since 2007, the National Center of Sexual Education (CENESEX) has led public campaigns to celebrate the International Day against Homophobia (May 17) and other initiatives to advocate the implementation of legislative actions and public policies in favor of homosexuals, bisexuals, and transsexuals. For a critical reflection on CENESEX and FMC’s endeavors to promote respect for sexual diversity, and the role of the media on that purpose, see Norma R. Guillard, “Cuba and the Revolutionary Struggle to Transform a Sexist Consciousness: Lesbians on the Cuban Screen,” *Latin American Perspectives* 36, no. 164 (January 2009): 63–71. As Guerrero reminds us, homophobia is not a simple and unidirectional phenomenon; it is irreducible to heterosexism. Her report about Cuban gays’ derogatory views of lesbians exemplifies the complex and interconnected character of discriminations based on sexual and gender prejudices. See Guerrero, “Género y diversidad: desigualdad, prejuicios y orientación sexual en Cuba,” 42.

“socialist moral norms” and with the “new man” [sic] who was expected to be created.\textsuperscript{52} According to Elaine Saralegui, while gradual acceptance and tolerance of homosexuality in Cuba are noticeable, discrimination against homosexuals still remains, particularly—although not exclusively—in churches.\textsuperscript{53} Even the very few Christian denominations which are considered socially progressive and theologically liberal wrestle with this issue. In contrast to denominations that publicly state their opposition to homosexual behaviors and practices, these churches are very careful dealing with this matter, and overall tolerate homosexuals’ participation and leadership in congregations (including pastors’ ordination) if they keep their sexual orientation as a private issue, that is, if they do not publicly declare their sexual orientation.\textsuperscript{54}

To summarize this point regarding sociocultural reconfigurations in contemporary Cuba, one could say that, as part of the complexity of the interrelated socioeconomic and cultural dynamics generated or stressed by the ongoing crises and the government attempts at reform, numerous dissenting groups have emerged with a new sense of purpose. In various ways they seriously question and critique the present social structures and relationships that allow and even reinforce the existing levels of economic and sociocultural disparity based on racial, gender, and sexual discrimination, and demand more spaces and opportunities of social and political participation to overcome those realities. And in various ways they question the “Marxist-
Leninist” framing of the Cuban project of revolution, and government policy priorities and frameworks since 1959.

Theoretical and Theological Shifts and Developments

1. Proliferation of Liberation Theologies

Thus far I have been noting the multiple, complex, and interconnected changes in the sociopolitical, economic and cultural dynamics in the world and how these expressed in the context of Cuba. As might be evident by now, these changes are fraught with religious overtones, which have directly impacted the understanding of the Christian faith and its theological production in many fronts. Together with the emerging “newer” social voices, for some time now “newer” theological subjects and perspectives are being articulated. While previously absent, issues related to disability, racial, gender, and sexual discrimination in society and churches have started to occupy a more relevant place in theological reflections and pastoral concerns.55 Some of these voices have been present in Latin America (and among Latinos/as in North America) since the 1970s, but it is only more recently that they have gained prominence in

the theological landscape. These voices signal the proliferation of liberation theological currents, which are reconfiguring the theological landscape and giving voice to the demands, concerns, and challenges of specific sectors of the population who experience varying levels and forms of discrimination and oppression and hope for liberation. They are also daring to


interrogate traditional approaches to theology (including earlier articulations of liberation theologies) and reflect theologically by themselves from their own ethnocultural background, life experiences, religious traditions, and praxis of liberation.\textsuperscript{58}

The confluence of these multiple debates and conversations has contributed to profound reconfigurations and recontextualizations of liberation theological discourses, paying special attention to the interconnected ways in which economic and ecological exploitation, political and gender oppression, and racial, ethnocultural, religious, and sexual discrimination occur. As some theologians and scholars claim, liberation theologies need to critically address the multifarious character of power relations by using a more holistic approach.\textsuperscript{59} For Otto Maduro, for example,
the acknowledgement of and critical reflection on the dynamic and rich diversity and complexity of people’s everyday life constitutes one of the main challenges and tasks for liberation theologies at the present historical context. He argues that this reflection must include the ways in which patriarchy, colonialism, racism, and other sociohistorical forms of domination and exploitation influence our understanding of society and our interpretations of theological concepts and terms such as God, Jesus Christ, Trinity, the Bible, salvation, church, mission, and evangelization. What is also required, he says, is a critical reflection on the historical, social, and cultural premises of our interpretations of “reality” and ways of constructing knowledge (including theological knowledge), and the ethical and political implications of such epistemological practices.

2. The “Decolonial Turn” as a “New” Promising Epistemological and Interpretive Framework for Liberation Theologies

Maduro’s comments about the need for opening new paths of critical theological reflection within liberation theologies in Latin America, the Caribbean and among Latinos/as in North America resonate with the proposals advanced by several scholars associated with the Latin American/Latino/a Research Project of Modernity/Coloniality. These scholars explore

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60 In Maduro’s opinion, Latin American liberation theologies have often tended to “descuidar, desconocer y disimular–con generalidades, paternalismos y simplificaciones–la profunda pluralidad y complejidad de nuestra gente oprimida, así como sus enormes contrastes y conflictos sicológicos, sociales, económicos, emocionales, laborales, raciales, culturales, lingüísticos, educacionales, políticos, religiosos, amorosos, sexuales, de autoridad, etc.” Otto Maduro, “¿Una vez más liberar la teología? Una invitación a la autocritica latinoamericana,” in Debate actual sobre la teología de la liberación, vol. 2 edited by José Ferraro (México D.F: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana/Editorial Itaca, 2007), 53–54.
61 Maduro, “¿Una vez más liberar la teología?” 62.
62 Ibid., 66.
63 Among the most prominent figures of this interdisciplinary group are Enrique Dussel, Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Fernando Coronil (he died in 2011), Ramón Grosfoguel, Edgardo Lander, Catherine Walsh, Arturo Escobar, Nelson Maldonado, Margarita Cervantes de Salazar, and Santiago Castro-Gómez. For an account of the origin and development of this project, see Santiago Castro-Gómez and Ramón Grosfoguel, “Giro decolonial, teoría crítica y pensamiento heterárquico,” in El giro decolonial: reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global, ed. Santiago Castro-Gómez and Ramón Grosfoguel (Santa Fe de Bogotá, Colombia: Siglo del Hombre Editores, Universidad Central, y Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2007); Arturo Escobar, “‘Mundos y
the complex process of hierarchical configuration of classes, genders, races, sexes, knowledges, and spiritualities as part of the formation of the modern/colonial/patriarchal/capitalist world-system.  

Instead of using multiple isolated and hierarchically distinguished analytical approaches to specific historical forms of oppression and domination (be they related to class, gender, sex, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, or environment), they propose an analytical framework that integrates the myriad loci (local, national, global) at which such oppressive and unjust realities, and their structural causes, intersect each other. Simultaneously, the members of the modernity/coloniality/de-coloniality research project advocate the de-linking from the Eurocentric epistemological paradigm that has led to the configuration of the “Western” imaginary and its universalizing logic. As I see it, the “de-colonial turn” encompasses three approaches.

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65 As Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel point out, the decolonial perspective focuses on “the heterarchy of the multiple [and conflicting] racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, economic, and epistemic relations that the first decolonization left intact (translation mine)” (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel, “Giro decolonial, teoríacrítica y pensamiento heterárquico,” 17). The members of this group introduce the category ‘coloniality’ and its counterpart ‘decoloniality’ to challenge the myth that colonization came to an end with the complex and long lasting processes of political/juridical independence/nationalization of colonies in Latin America during the nineteenth century, and in Asia and Africa at the middle of the twentieth century. They rather seek to contribute to the cultural, political, and epistemological decolonization that the “first decolonization” that took place in Latin America in the nineteenth century was not able to fully achieve.

66 It is worth noting that this research project is one expression of a diversity of Latin American academic, theoretical endeavors to decolonize dominant ways of thinking and sociocultural structures and practices constitutive of the colonial inheritance in the continent. While sharing some views and insights regarding the mechanisms and effects of colonization of territories, natural resources, and people (bodies and subjectivities), some of these research/reflection groups significantly differ in terms of their social and ethnocultural location, use of analytical frameworks, perspectives, theoretical sources, motivation, goals, etc. See, for example, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, “Chixinakuxutxiwa. Una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores,” in *Modernidad y pensamiento descolonizador*, edited by Mario Yupi (La Paz: U-PIEB - IFEA, 2006), 3–16; Elena Yehia, “Descolonización del conocimiento y la práctica: un encuentro dialógico entre el programa de investigación sobre
main critical interpretive and epistemological strategies with the purpose of exposing, critiquing, and overcoming the socioeconomic, cultural and intellectual/epistemic legacy of modernity/coloniality in Latin America.

First, in exploring the process of constitution and historical development of the modern/colonial/capitalist world system across the Atlantic Ocean during the sixteenth century, they critically analyze the complex colonial matrix of power put in place as part of this process. Quijano, for instance, argues that the colonization of “Latin America” involved the imposition of a pattern of domination based on the control of the processes of production and reproduction of life in different spheres: labor, nature, sex, subjectivity, and institutional authority. This pattern of domination, which he calls “coloniality of power,” was built upon the hierarchical and homogenizing sociocultural and ethno-racial classification of colonizing and colonized populations. The phenotypic differences between the colonizers and the colonized were


68 Besides the conquest of new territories, the massacres of thousands of native peoples, the sacking and despoliation of their natural resources, and the destruction of their communal system of life, the colonization of Amerindia meant the denial of the identities of the colonized (mayas, aztecas, guaranies, toltecas, aymaras, incas, etc.). These were replaced violently with homogenizing new ones that resulted in their racialization and marginalization. They came to be known as “indios/as,” ‘negros/as’ (in the case of the Africans brought as slaves, who came from different ethnic groups as well, such as, congos, yorubas, bacongos, ashantis, etc.), ‘mestizos/as’ (the descendants of ‘white’ male Europeans and indigenous females, and ‘mulatos/as’ (resulting from the mixture of Europeans and Africans).
racialized and culturalized in a hierarchical manner. The European, white, male, heterosexist “identity” was imposed and assumed as superior over the other homogenized ethnocultural groups. This ethno-racial classification, Quijano says, facilitated the naturalization of the Eurocentric colonizing control of territories, natural and human resources, and subjectivity understood as production of knowledge and relation between subjects. Thus, the racialization of power relations became an expression of the Eurocentric pattern of colonial power, and also contributed significantly to legitimize it.\textsuperscript{69} This exercise of social and racial classification was consubstantial with the incipient processes of accumulation of capital. Coloniality of power refers not only to the spatial-temporal coincidence of hierarchical classification of the world population and the international division of labor, structured in a center-periphery relationship, but also, and more important, to their mutual instrumentality as part of the complex process of capitalist accumulation.\textsuperscript{70} The political independence of the colonies and the consequent nationalization processes did not mean the dismantling of the colonial structures and relations of power. The subalternization and marginalization of significant sectors of the population continued at worse levels than during the colonial period as a consequence of the dominating practices perpetuated by Creole oligarchies.\textsuperscript{71} Coloniality of power, decolonial theoreticians claim, continues to operate at present in more complex and surreptitious ways, now camouflaged with globalizing socioeconomic and cultural processes.

Inextricably linked to the previous critical interpretive strategy, these scholars propose a second one: to transgress the hegemony of Western modern/colonial imaginary by de-linking

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\textsuperscript{69}Quijano, “Colonialidad del poder y clasificación social,” 120.

\textsuperscript{70}Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel, “Giro decolonial, teoría crítica y pensamiento heterárquico,” 19.

\textsuperscript{71}Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui, “Colonialism and its Replicants,” in Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui, eds., Coloniality at Large, 9.
from Eurocentric epistemological perspectives and ways of thinking. Through the articulation of categories such as transmodernity, geopolitics of knowledge, colonial difference, border thinking, epistemic disobedience, and coloniality of knowledge and being, they seek to unmask the geopolitical and culturally local character of Eurocentric forms of subjectivity and knowledge (including languages) and their imposition—violently in no few occasions—as universalizing “truths.”72 Thus we see their strong criticisms of Eurocentrism as a key component of modernity/coloniality. As they write, the formation of the modern/colonial world system, through the implementation of globalizing projects (Civilizing mission, Christianization, and Modernization), meant not only a process of geopolitical, economic, cultural, and religious expansion/domination. It also signified the imposition of languages and forms of knowledge (imaginaries, assumptions, rationalities, categories, and “scientific” theories) that contributed to the universalization of Eurocentric (and North Atlantic) conceptions and expressions of human life, society, culture, and knowledge. The second strategy, then, aims a de-linking (Quijano) from hegemonic modern/colonial epistemes.

This epistemic disobedience, understood as transgression of Eurocentric epistemologies, becomes a twofold move, because it also implies an opening to alternative contesting forms of knowledge. This is the third epistemological strategy: the restitution and incorporation of marginalized ethno-cultural experiences, memories, spiritualities, manners of constructing and organizing knowledge, “primitive” imaginaries and forms of interpreting “reality,” and devalued

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languages and ways of expression. Appropriately understood, disobedient and transgressing subaltern ways of thinking have been present in Amerindia since its colonization. Mignolo, Dussel, and others find the precursors of decolonial thought in these long-standing traditions of indigenous (including “pre-Hispanic” ones), Latin American, and Afro-Caribbean voices resistant to the European (and later North American) imperial and colonizing legacy. These traditions constitute the main critical sources for the modernity/coloniality research program, and become part of decolonial genealogy. The intention behind the attempts to configure this genealogy is to show how the critiques of and practices of resistance to the colonial legacies have erupted at different historical moments, in different ways, and with different degrees of complexity and radicalism. In this sense, Maldonado-Torres argues:

every [social] movement, every revolution, every intellectual endeavor that has attempted to restore the humanity of the dehumanized, without taking the humanity of the modern colonizer as normative, and promoting generosity and joint action among the dehumanized themselves and their allies are part of de-colonial thought and represent diverse and practical expressions of the de-colonial turn.

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74 The “genealogy” of de-colonial thought should not be understood as historically a well-defined, monolithic, and fixed tradition, exempt of tensions, ambiguities, and contradictions. In point of fact, there is no consensus about who should be considered as part of it. Apparently, not all scholars employ the same criteria in order to accept a given intellectual production, theoretical elaboration, or cultural manifestation as a particular expression of de-colonial thought. The list varies depending on who writes it, but may encompass thinkers such as Guamán Poma de Ayala, Garcilazo de la Vega, Ottoba Cugoano, Tupac Amaru, José Martí, José Carlos Mariátegui, Edmundo O’Gorman, José María Arguedas, Franz Fanon, Edouard Glissant, Aimé Césaire, Orlando Fals Borda, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Leopoldo Zea, Rodolfo Kusch, Enrique Dussel, Rigoberta Menchú, and Gloria Anzaldúa, to name a few. In addition, the configuration of de-colonial thought is not the exclusive expression of individual intellectual endeavors. The epistemological shift embodied by social movements and organizations such as the Zapatistas, South and Central American Indigenous movements and organizations, and the World Social Forum are also manifestations of the de-colonial turn. See Alejandro de Oto, “Pensamiento descolonial/decolonial (1),” in Diccionario de pensamiento alternativo II, http://ecceans.org/articulo.asp?id=285 (accessed July 15, 2011).

“Decolonial” scholars are increasingly paying attention to the role played by theoretical and intellectual currents, such as philosophy of liberation, dependency theories, Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed (*educación popular*), and liberation theologies on the understanding of Latin America’s coloniality and the articulation of decolonizing critiques of the modern/colonial capitalist world system. Referring specifically to liberation theologies, some argue that these theological reflections have “transcended traditional Marxist notions of alienation, re-signified religious narratives as discourses of liberation and popular resistance, and created a new rhetoric and a new concept of social change which connected with popular beliefs and emancipatory political agendas.”

Indeed, with all the methodological and hermeneutical limitations that one could find in retrospect in light of more recent theoretical developments, liberation theologians’ articulations also expressed early steps toward an epistemic and hermeneutical de-linking from Eurocentric theologies dominant in the academia and both Catholic and Protestant churches. As José Míguez Bonino put it in the mid-1970s, the theology “for liberation” that was emerging in Latin America at the time represented “the quest for a post-colonial and post-neocolonial understanding of the Christian gospel.”

“Liberation theology” was not merely a different interpretation of classical theological doctrines from a different place of enunciation, but a reconfiguration and redrawing of theological horizons and hermeneutical methodology. Liberation theologians not only changed the content of the theological conversation with Eurocentric dominant theologies, whether classic, liberal, neo-orthodox, or political ones; they also shifted the very terms of theological articulation. Their introduction and further elaborations of notions such as the preferential option

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77 Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui, “Colonialism and Its Replicants,” 15.
78 José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, 18.
79 See, for instance, Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*. 
for the poor, the epistemological privilege of the oppressed, the concrete experiences of faith in a context of suffering, poverty, oppression, marginalization, and death as the starting point of the circular theological hermeneutical process, exemplify this fundamental methodological shift. In my judgment, liberation theologies are authentic—although limited—expressions of the type of epistemic disobedience and de-linking to which decolonial scholars refer.

However, my suggestion that liberation theologies should be considered part of decolonial traditions of thought does not mean that they were and are exempt of reproducing and reinforcing Eurocentric modern homogenizing epistemological viewpoints, and do not need to be challenged and enriched by other cosmologies, spiritualities, epistemologies, and hermeneutics. Thus, I can affirm a twofold relevance of de-colonial “approach” to liberation theology/ies. First, it helps understand the diverse ways in which liberation theologies already represented key moments in the repeated irruptions of the de-colonial attitude. Second, the decolonial epistemological turn brings to light the various ways in which liberation theologians still fail to challenge important elements of the colonial matrix of power.

Conclusion

In my opinion, decolonial thinking provides the (most) promising critical lens today for reconstructing theological frameworks for addressing the capitalist modern/colonial legacies in the continent (and beyond), and the myriad intersecting forms of exploitation, oppression, and marginalization as a result of such a complex historical process. The contribution of this intellectual project for liberation theologies also lies in its call to rethink the very structures of acquisition, construction, and reproduction of theological knowledge, and to interrogate the ways

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81 Ary Fernández Albán, “Descolonialidad y teología de la liberación: una exploración del desarrollo del ‘pensamiento des-colonial’ y sus implicaciones para las teologías de la liberación,” in Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology, 18, no. 2 (September 2013): 29-64.
in which these theological articulations perpetuate and reinscribe the colonial agenda and project. Moreover, the implications of decolonial thinking go beyond strictly intellectual issues; it also promotes the integration of multiple discursive practices and political actions oriented to decolonizing political-economic, socio-cultural, ideological-epistemological, and inter-subjective relations and structures of domination.

In the next chapter, as an effort to contribute to the growing debate about the historical developments of liberation theologies, their present status, and their future possibilities, I situate my critical view of Sergio Arce’s theological thought (his contributions and legacy) within the decolonial thinking conversation.
Chapter 5

Sergio Arce’s Legacy and Inspiration to the Renewal of Theology Today

Introduction

In chapters two and three, I discussed Arce’s main contributions to Cuban and Latin American theological thought. Here I want to suggest that his most important legacy was methodological and epistemological, the way in which he did theology. For some Cuban scholars his “theology in Revolution” also meant a revolution in theology, at least in the context of Cuba. His was a revolutionary theology because of his pastoral experiences with the people, their sufferings and hopes, and their experiences with the revolution in its different expressions over time, and because of his specific approach. He forged new ways of doing theology in response to the complex, dynamic, and conflicting Cuban socio-cultural-political-economic reality. As he articulated it, the church was being called to be incarnated by participating in such “liberating process.”¹ As pointed out in chapters two and three above, in his 1965 essay “The Mission of the Church in a Socialist Society,” Arce established the foundations of what he later called “theology in Revolution.” In that essay he sketched a set of themes that became central in his theology, and which I discuss at length in chapters two and three above. There, he also began to display some of the features of his theological method: One, his emphatic commitment to thinking theologically in explicitly contextual ways; two, his pastoral concern in a way that insisted on the necessary praxiological implication of the Christian message as centered on the “option for the poor;” three, his undeniable reclamation of the biblical text as the foundation of his theological reflections; and four, his persistent engagement in political and economic debates as part and parcel of the theological task in a liberationist key, which provoked him to reinterpret “Marxist”

¹See chapter one where I discuss the ways the Cuban Protestant Churches reproduced the sociocultural, hermeneutical, and ideological frameworks inherited from missionary boards.
principles in creative ways. In my view, these elements embody Sergio Arce’s legacy. However, as I think about what can be retrieved of Arce’s theological proposal for the present context of Cuba and for the renewal of theology, I will discuss these features in terms of pastoral concern, contextual focus, biblical foundation, and political-economic dimension in his work. I will also add that his theology embodies an incipient decolonial orientation. These will constitute the larger portion of this chapter.

As noted earlier, Arce’s theological work helped to forge liberationist theological thought in Cuba, Latin America, and the Caribbean and, despite the many changes that have taken place in Cuba and Latin America since the 1960s and 1970s, many of his theological reflections continue to be relevant today. Those theological reflections, I suggest, are important aspects of his larger legacy, and they should be seriously considered as sources of inspiration and theological perspicuity by all those committed to the renewal of liberating theological discourses in Cuba in coming years.

Keeping in mind my sketches of contemporary changes and challenges (from the 1990s to now) and the revised and expanded decolonial framework described in chapter four, I identify key gaps and limitations in Arce’s framework over three decades. More importantly, I also highlight the enduring insights and inspiration of his project in meeting challenges for the present. I will note how Arce’s theology, with all its limitations, was already giving voice to some issues and concerns that resonate closely with the Latin American/Latino/a decolonial epistemological project.

Theology as Necessarily Practical and Pastoral

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Arce’s theology was distinctively geared toward the practical and pastoral concerns. Although he was appointed as a professor of systematic theology, he was not interested in becoming a historian of Christian dogmas or in constructing a theological system as usually expected in the academia. His primary motivation for doing theology was to help Cuban Christians and their churches in reflecting on and responding to the challenges being faced in the new and complex historical context. His theological reflections sought to provoke the church toward engaging the revolutionary process with the purpose of constructing more just and egalitarian social structures and relationships, and forming a “new human being” for such a new social system. His motivation, focus, and content were not merely doctrinal or theoretical, but ethical-missiological.

Arce’s “theology in Revolution” did not emerge from the academia and he did not formulate it to be intellectually consumed by professional theologians and scholars. His thinking was the fruit of ongoing processes of reflection built on his pastoral experiences with people in poor rural communities and urban neighborhoods and forged in pulpits of local churches, workshops in training church leaders, presentations at gatherings of the Student Christian Movement and ecumenical organizations, and lectures delivered in seminary classrooms. His theology found its main sources of inspiration and immediate audience among Christians committed to the Cuban revolution and the sociopolitical and economic liberation of Latin American peoples. His work reflects a sense of urgency, a preoccupation for addressing immediate concerns and debates always without enough time and space for more reflective, systematic study and argumentation. His writings did not often follow the scholarly requirements conventionally demanded in academia. One could say that, when compared to other theologians, including liberation theologians, many of his writings
seem to be less “sophisticated” and academically rigorous. Indeed, on many occasions he did not cite the sources he used. His style was quite homiletical. It would seem as though he was always preaching and afraid to interrupt the logic of his argument, to diminish its power and passion, with stylistic and, for him, unimportant scholarly details.

Arce’s theological language was full of colloquial phrases and cubanismos (Cuban idiomatic expressions), employed as images, metaphors, and sometimes even as theological concepts. He used popular phrases to communicate his theological insights and interpretations more clearly to people in pews. He debated complicated themes using a language quite familiar to the people of the Church, without renouncing substantial intellectual rigor. Quite early in his theological journey, he recognized that making his theological language more sophisticated or “esperantístico” would fail to communicate his ideas to the church communities. For Arce, the significance of his approach was that it was articulated for common believers. It was not elaborated by doctos (learned persons) to be understood exclusively or primarily by doctos. As he put it, it was sufficient that the least brothers and sisters of Jesus understood them (Mt. 25. 40, 45).

Many may consider the hurried, partial, incomplete, and “unscholarly” character of Arce’s texts to be problematic. But the “unsophistication,” urgency, and unfinished character of his theological reflections could be interpreted positively when one considers his motivations, context, aims, and main interlocutors. In the midst of the “socialist” context of Cuba, the particular challenges faced by Christian communities in

3 Arce’s rich use of imagery and metaphors was recognized by some liberation theologians. See for instance, Hugo Assmann’s observations in “Discusión” in Praxis cristiana y producción teológica. Materiales del Encuentro de teologías celebrado en la Comunidad Teológica de México (8-10 Octubre, 1977), eds. Jorge Pixley and Jean Pierre Bastián (Salamanca, España: Sígueme, 1979), 237.
4 Arce, “Teología cubana: teología en revolución,” 63. Esperantístico here refers to Esperanto, the constructed language designed to function as universal but which few people understand and are able to speak.
this context, and the pressures to make many fundamental choices quickly, he was much more concerned with *ortopraxis* than with *ortodoxia*. For him, the significance of theological theorizing did not rest on how comprehensive and scientifically accurate the analysis of a social reality may be or on the accuracy of the language employed to interpret a theological doctrine. In his view, theological articulations were relevant insofar as they contributed to the integral liberation and renewal of humans, society, and creation in the context of great pressures to act. In retrospect we can see that the noticeable inaccuracies, generalizations, oversimplifications, and insufficient scholarship present in his writings correspond with the contextual demands to provide a quick theological response to complicated and “urgent” social and ecclesial issues. He was more preoccupied to reinterpret the ethical and missiological implications of the Gospel in that particular time and history for the church than to meet formal academic requirements of ivory towers far removed from daily struggles of ordinary people. In my view, this tendency to respond theologically to the changing social context with virtually no time for attention to detail and the rigors of academic sophistication is one of his most important contributions and significant legacy for current theological endeavors.

**Theology as Concrete and Contextual**

Arce rejected the prevailing understanding of theology as an abstract speculative reflection on God’s nature and revelation. Like other liberation theologians, he formulated theology as a critical reflection on God’s biblical revelation, in light of the church’s practice of faith in a concrete sociohistorical context. He nurtured an intentionally contextual theology; in his earliest writings, the *circumstances* in which the church was called to fulfill its mission became a key starting point. He viewed the complex protracted “revolutionary” process in Cuba as the principal historical place
within which he articulated his theology. This context was his *locus theologicus*. Although the starting point of his theology was the praxis of the church in revolution, or “with its back facing the revolution,” his theological reflection included the revolutionary praxis of non-Christian people, which “engaged [in] the task of constructing the new Cuban society.”

Since the early 1960s, Arce elaborated his own “hermeneutical circle” between his understanding of Christianity and his interpretation of the new Cuban social context. He began to interpret the revolutionary context in light of the biblical witness, while reinterpreting the theological contents and meanings of his Christian tradition—including the biblical texts—in light of the very particular revolutionary situation in Latin America and the Caribbean at the time. As explained in chapter two, he developed his theology in response to very specific and concrete church’ needs and multiple challenges brought about by the new social context.

The contextual character of Arce’s theological interpretations set him apart from his Cuban colleagues. In certain respects his approach also set him apart from other versions of liberation theology elsewhere. Although he recognized significant commonalities between his perspectives and those of his liberationist Latin American counterparts, he also noted critical differences. No doubt, many of these differences reflected the specific—“revolutionary”—context in which he and other Cubans were struggling for another future.

However, in retrospect we can see that Arce was not contextual enough. There are a few instances in which Arce betrayed his commitment to the contextual character of theology. He criticized liberation theologians for not considering sufficiently the “Cuban socialist revolution” as a valid and necessary model of liberation and

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7 Arce, “Itinerario teológico.”
construction of the reign of God in the historical circumstances of Latin America. And surely he was correct in chiding them for not paying sufficient attention to the Cuban revolutionary process (and not only as an inspirational historic event) and for not taking seriously the theological works being produced in that social context. However, implying that the Cuban “Revolution” could be “replicated” in Latin American and Caribbean countries, he undermined his own commitment to the contextual nature of theology. Especially in retrospect it is easy to see that Arce neglected the diverse and complex sociohistorical, political, cultural and economic realities of these countries, and their significant differences with regard to Cuba. He also failed to recognize the multiple other socioeconomic and political factors that facilitated the Cuban revolutionary process; instead, he reduced it to the triumph of the armed insurrection of 1959 and an oversimplified picture of a single good option –the construction of a Marxist-Leninist social order. To be fair, his thinking in terms of frameworks, categories, formulations of options and choices echoed the prevailing political and ideological discourses of the time. In any case, in retrospect one can see the heavy costs associated with such a view and the utter inadequacy of these formulations today.

Arce insisted that the contextual character of his *Theology in Revolution* corresponded to the contingent and provisional nature of a constantly changing revolutionary social context. In hindsight, we can see that he was partially right, particularly during the first two decades of that process of social transformations. He wrote in response to the changes that were taking place within the revolutionary project in connection with international socio-political developments, and their subsequent challenges to the church. Gradually, however, he paid less attention to the changes on the ground and increasingly wrote about the Cuban “reality” using unqualified, generalizing, and abstract ideas, which oversimplified the rich diversity and complexity
of the Cuban society. Moreover, Arce often referred to the Cuban revolutionary process as “the Revolution,” giving the impression that it was a single, homogeneous, or even an ontological reality, rather than a series of unpredictable processes involving multiple contradictions, conflicting and changing external and internal factors and forces, events, and actors. Although many are the factors that may have contributed to Arce’s speaking of “the Revolution,” in doing so he reproduced the official rhetoric. He as well as many others employed the term “the Revolution” as the all-encompassing revolutionary process. Simultaneously, he gradually began to rely more and more on abstract ideas about the process, which did not account for the conflicting and rapidly changing context.

Amidst enormous outside and inside pressures and ideological assaults that sought to annihilate the Cuban socialist project, and by adopting perceived binary opposing ideological poles, Arce participated in the wider process of reifying the Cuban sociopolitical process. He uncritically assumed the “revolution’s” “liberating” manifestations without examining its limitations and contradictions in the concrete everyday life of the people. As a result, he adopted a monolithic hermeneutical/ideological stance, which prevented him from explicitly acknowledging the shortcomings and contradictions in Cuban socialism. He failed to identify, name, and criticize situations of social injustice, oppression, discrimination, and marginalization in Cuba during the “revolutionary period.”

Arce’s theological work was ground-breaking for his time. It is still influential today. But the simple/binary way in which he framed the context needs rethinking for

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theologically interpreting the current complex social realities of Cuba and Latin America. As new theological voices emerge in Cuba (and Latin America), they are speaking to the life experiences, problems, relationships, and zones of the social “reality” left unexplored by Arce.⁹ These new insights are the fruits of new movements which emerged more recently. Drawing on his pioneering contextual theological endeavor, these voices highlight the social contradictions and situations of suffering caused by multiple forms of injustice, oppression, exploitation, marginalization, and discrimination in Cuban society and the church. The internal and external causes of these situations and ways in which they interconnect must be analyzed. In so doing, theological subjects will be better positioned to interpret and critically reflect on God’s active presence/absence in people’s daily life through social structures and dynamics. They will be also better equipped to suggest to the church concrete strategies and actions in order to fulfill its mission in this new historical context.

**Theology as Biblical Hermeneutics in a Cuban Interpretive Key**

Although Arce did not consider himself a biblical scholar, the Bible occupied a central place in his theology. He claimed that any theological reflection from a Christian perspective must be grounded on the biblical testimony of God’s self-disclosure. Yet, he was also convinced that there is no neutral or no ideologically-free reading of the biblical text. The anti-neocolonialist and anti-capitalist character of his theological thought conditioned his biblical hermeneutics. He was not limited by spiritualizing readings or the dominant interpretive approaches. Rather, he demonstrated creativity in interpreting biblical texts, at times transgressing some conventional readings of the Bible. One good example is his interpretation of Ephesians 4: 26: “do not let the sun go down upon your wrath” (NIV). By connecting it to his understanding of God’s holiness

⁹See chapter 4, n. 54.
in terms of divine wrath against all injustices, he interpreted the phrase not as a general
call to appease anger and to resolve the differences/problems with someone else. On the
contrary, wrath against injustice, exploitation, and everything that harms the whole of
humanity must be so great that, the sun could not go down upon it. Arce interpreted this
biblical passage as an exhortation to continue the anti-imperialist struggle against all
exploitation and oppressive situations mainly provoked by an unjust capitalist
worldwide political-economic order.\\footnote{Arce, “El hombre nuevo: Ideología y encarnación,” 79–90.}

Stated differently, Arce’s theology was a Bible-based theology with a
hermeneutical circle that explicitly engaged sociopolitical/economic issues in re-reading
both the biblical past and the present. He interpreted the God revealed in the Bible as
the divine liberator “that becomes actualized” in those involved in the process of
liberation: “in the renewal of society, in the creation of new and more just
socioeconomic and political structures, [and] in the anti-imperialist struggle,” which, for
him, also meant the elimination/transformation of capitalist relations of ownership,
production, and distribution of goods.\\footnote{Arce, “La teología como desafío,” 43.}

Taking as his starting point the context of Cuba after 1959, he constructed his
theology during the late 1960’s and early 1970’s in explicitly biblical paradigm terms
that differed from other liberation theologians of the first generation. Instead of drawing
on the liberating experience of the Exodus, he emphasized the theological significance
of the creation narratives (Gen 1-2) for the Cuban social context.\\footnote{Arce, “Hacia una teología de la liberación, 48-50.”}
The downfall of Batista’s dictatorship opened the door to the possibility of liberating Cuban society from
the evils associated with its neocolonial capitalist condition. In participating in a
revolutionary situation in which many dimensions of the social reality were deeply
transformed, most Cubans felt sociopolitically and economically liberated. In that
context, Arce viewed the Exodus narrative as helpful to reflect theologically upon the liberating/salvific meaning of the triumph of the popular insurrection. But he found the creation stories much more appealing and fruitful for a context in which “new” redemptive social and ecclesial realities were being created.\(^\text{13}\) Moreover, it seems to me that for him, using the Exodus as a biblical paradigm in a context in which many Cubans—including Christians—were emigrating to the U.S. fleeing from what they termed Communist “slavery” could be seen as very confusing and problematic.

Arce did share with other liberation theologians several hermeneutical principles. He, as other Latin America liberation theologians, reclaimed the central role of the biblical message in their theological reflections. In so doing, they re-contextualized its message in relation to their particular socioeconomic, political, and cultural situations. Their commitment to the poor and oppressed, and their struggles for liberation substantially conditioned their analyses/interpretations of both the social milieu and the biblical texts, using predominantly class lenses and political-economic categories. Arce, as other liberation theologians, unmasked the pretense of ideological neutrality behind the prevailing biblical interpretive approaches. They demonstrated that there is no such thing as an “objective” reading of the Bible. As far as they were concerned, all interpretive exercise is ideological; the question was how to identify the ideology/ies that conditioned and influenced given interpretations of the Bible. Hence the importance of adopting a suspicious stance when faced with interpretations or approaches that claimed to be “neutral,” devoid of ideological commitments, and universally applicable. This approach to hermeneutics is a key feature of Arce’s hermeneutical/theological method which I see as relevant even for today.

\(^{13}\)Arce, “Teología cubana: teología en revolución,” 76-77.
Arce incorporated his hermeneutical approach in the context of the church. As he worked as pastor for more than fifty years, he interpreted and preached on innumerable biblical stories and pericopes every Sunday, helping his parishioners to find the meaning of their faith in light of their complex social reality. It is for this reason that one finds many of his theological ideas articulated in his sermons, underlying the pastoral/missiological orientation of his theology.14

Since the 1970s multiple “new” and critical discourses (e.g., women, Afro-descendants, and indigenous communities) within liberation theology have been emerging and been gaining theoretical sophistication overtime.15 As they have brought forth their concerns and proposals, they have also become critical of some aspects in liberation theology’s hermeneutical perspective. They have been joined by some feminist, postcolonial and decolonial biblical scholars and theologians who have pointed out that, despite the commitment of liberation theologians to the socioeconomic and political liberation of the oppressed people in Latin America, and their endeavors to liberate theology and biblical interpretation from their dominant ideological orientations, they were unable to fully escape the modern, androcentric/patriarchal (and heterosexist) interpretive frames predominant in their times.16 These currents emphasize

14 For a compilation of Arce’s sermons, see Sergio Arce, Las siete y las setenta veces siete palabras (La Habana; Quito: Centro de Estudios del Consejo de Iglesias de Cuba; Departamento de Comunicaciones del CLAI, 1997).
that most liberation theologians understood economic exploitation, material poverty, and social inequality as the primary expressions of oppression and social injustice, which resulted in assigning all other forms of oppression, discrimination, and marginalization a subordinated role. All other important dimensions of human life and identity such as culture, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and popular religiosity were not as explicitly included. As a result, particularly in the early stages of liberation theologies, the relationship between socioeconomic exploitation and marginalization and other forms of oppression needed further problematization and theorization.

Many are the criticisms directed to liberation theologians. These scholars are chided for adopting a narrow socioeconomic approach to the reading of the Bible. They are blasted for using a simplistic binary reading/classification of social dynamics and historical subjects in terms of hierarchical dualisms such as rich/poor, oppressor/oppressed, capitalism/socialism, developed countries/underdeveloped countries, and a number of others we would think of today including humanity/the earth, male/female, heterosexual/LGBTIQQ. They are also criticized for their failure to recognize the multiplicity of historical subjects and situations of oppression and exploitation and subsuming them under the homogenizing category of the poor. They are often accused of being over-zealous and thinking they speak for all subaltern subjects, and for adopting a Christ-centered theological position that leaves no room for religious pluralism.

Given these criticisms, it becomes evident that, even while Arce distanced himself somewhat from other liberation theologians, that is, in his disagreements with


Ibid., 127-28.

Sugirtharajah, Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation, 104-23.
liberation theologians’ endorsement of the Exodus as the foundational biblical paradigm of theological discourses of liberation in Latin America, nevertheless he deployed the same biblical and theological hermeneutical principles they used.\textsuperscript{20} Some of the features mentioned in the previous paragraph have fallen into disrepute more recently because of their limitations in dealing with more pluralistic, porous, and complex socio-historical, cultural, and theoretical currents.

While recognizing the importance of socioeconomic hermeneutical approaches to the Bible, new theological voices in Cuba have more recently been incorporating other concerns and lenses in interpreting the biblical texts. Debates on social and cultural discrimination and inequality related to race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and disability are emerging in relation to hermeneutics.\textsuperscript{21} Still, as I see it, as important as each of these perspectives is, these interpretive endeavors miss a critical reflection on the interconnectedness of those issues and debates; that is, there is need to reflect on how the various situations of inequality, oppression, marginalization, and multifarious stereotypes become interwoven, both in the Cuban society (and churches) and in the


Bible. As the debates among critical theorists confirm, socio-cultural frameworks often overlook the political economic dimensions of these dynamics – a concern at the heart of the efforts to move beyond separate discourses of class, race, gender, etc. by decolonial theorists. Moreover, there is need to reflect on how our multiple identities, social locations, and forms of participation in power relations affect our interpretations of the Bible and the social contexts. Taking into consideration the present shifts and transformations the Cuban economy and society are undergoing, it behooves us to work on interpretive perspectives that will equip the church to respond relevantly in a liberative manner, aspiring to speak across sociocultural differences to the broadest range of people. With this in mind, and despite its limitations, I suggest that Arce’s socioeconomic concerns, regarding biblical interpretation and the global contexts today are still relevant.

More basically, in my judgment, Arce’s main legacy in terms of biblical hermeneutics lies in the “freedom” and creative boldness with which he faced the hermeneutical task. The originality he displayed in interpreting the Bible to “illuminate” and respond to very specific, complex, and controversial social and ecclesial situations remains an inspiration for the continuing articulation of contextual and liberation theologies in Cuba and beyond. Most decisively, he broke away from dominant/conventional and spiritualistic interpretive patterns and from the illusion that there is one obvious, right interpretation of biblical texts – guaranteed by the “tradition” or by the “scientific reading” of the Bible.

Theology in Cuba as Political Economy

For Arce, spelling out the relationship between the discourses of “faith” and the “economy” as conventionally conceived was a priority. He thought that the theological reflection on the praxis of a people committed to the construction of a socialist society
should be elaborated primarily in political-economic terms. He insisted that economic relations are central to all social relations. This becomes evident as one finds in his theological work economic-ethical-anthropological categories such as “work” (labor), “distributive justice,” and the human being as “ecómono” (homo oeconomicus). Similarly, he interpreted key theological concepts and doctrines through a political/economic lens. He pointed to the socioeconomic and political dimension of theological ideas, as they are formulated in particular contexts, and how they elucidate concepts such as God, Trinity, revelation, salvation/liberation, justification, sanctification, incarnation, evangelization, sin, and spirituality.  

From the beginning, Arce’s theology was critical of capitalist structures/projects and the bourgeois religious ideology that sacralizes it. As early as 1965 he wrote: “the church has to begin by ideologically destroying its own idols” in order to be a “church in Revolution,” that is, to be part of the people as it participates in the construction of the Cuban Marxist-Leninist socialist society. In order to accomplish this, the church must reject the capitalist ideological tenets (sanctity of private ownership, primacy of market over human needs, and social class differences as the ‘natural’ order) because they stand in opposition to the Christian message of love of neighbor and care for creation and life. Arce drew on Jesus’ rejection of the possibility of serving both God and money (Mt. 6.24); for Arce, there was nothing more necessary for a revolutionary theology of liberation than articulating a theological critique of capitalism. Pointing to the liberative message of the biblical prophetic tradition, he, like other liberation theologians, also drew on Marxist critical traditions. He claimed that “[t]he anti-God is Mammon … the accumulation of money, capital, means of production, and goods to the

22 Arce, The Church and Socialism.
detrim
ent of the majority.” Capitalism, he claimed, is the negation of the kind of human solidarity brought about by the Holy Spirit. Capitalism shows its emptiness of God, its “a-theo-ism,” as it thwarts the practice of love-justice which, according to the biblical witness, is God’s “essence.”

His theological criticisms resonated with the criticisms of “capitalism” by other liberation theologians. These theologians, he noted, had devised theological critiques of the necrophiliac and idolatrous character of capitalism and the “theologies of death” that sought to legitimize it. However, he affirmed, their critical approach was not enough! Liberation theological perspectives needed to include reflections that explicitly and critically supported specific, concrete and “effectively” ongoing sociopolitical projects of liberation, such as the Cuban socialist revolutionary process. In so doing, these theologians would move beyond speaking of liberation in abstract and idealistic terms, toward specific social realities in which liberation was already historically expressed.

Arce tended toward binary formulations, all too familiar during “Cold War” tensions and debates. For him, in an almost Manichean way, there were simply only two kinds of societies: “socialism” and “capitalism.” He saw the establishment of socialism in Latin America countries as the only “real” possibility of overcoming their perennial status of “underdevelopment,” and undoing their economic-political and cultural dependency on the centers of the world capitalist system. Moreover, Arce thought that socialism could only become a reality through revolutionary processes, by radically transforming the socioeconomic, political, and cultural structures and relationships. Although at the beginning the revolutionary processes were more populist and

25 Arce, “Perspectivas de la tarea teológica a partir de la praxis de la construcción de una nueva sociedad,” 16.
27 In particular, he mentioned—without quoting or citing them—Hugo Assmann and Franz J. Hinkelammert. See Hugo Assmann and Franz J. Hinkelammert, A idolatria do mercado: ensaio sobre economia e teologia.
28 Arce, “Perspectivas de la tarea teológica a partir de la praxis de la construcción de una nueva sociedad,” 12.
nationalist in character, he judged that those processes eventually had to follow a Marxist-Leninist path in order to prevail in such highly polarized international geopolitical climate. It is appropriate to note that for Arce and many others such binary understanding of the debates and concerns appeared to be the only plausible alternative for Cuba at that time, especially when compared to uneven capitalist underdevelopment and dictatorships elsewhere in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

Many liberation theologians advocated the transformation of their dependent neo-colonial capitalist societies into forms of a “Latin American socialism.” Many of these theologians, however, were also very cautious regarding imperialist attitudes and undemocratic performances of socialist governments, especially in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries. Other liberation theologians in Latin America were not as enthusiastic and categorical as Arce was in praising socialism, much less its Marxist-Leninist versions. In part, these attitudes expressed by the liberation theologians corresponded with the different conditions in their respective countries in relation to the Soviet Union. They were “freer” to take account of the growing criticism of the USSR while also criticizing U.S.-centered projects for (re)ordering the world (e.g., developmentalism, structural adjustments and neoliberal globalization).

Arce argued that liberation theology could properly be done only if “all the aspects of the liberating popular struggle [are seriously assumed]; not only in the prerevolutionary stage of the struggle for power but also when the people take the power in their own hands and initiate a spiritual, sociopolitical, economic, and ecological reconstruction of the human being…” Yet, by framing the issues and choices in binary terms and from a predominantly economic-political perspective, he


overlooked the complexity and diversity of social realities, concerns, strategies and struggles for liberation, and religious practices both in Cuba and Latin America, and over time the costs of this neglect grew. He also neglected to assess the adequacy of other socioeconomic-political configurations and theoretical/theological discourses and perspectives which differed from his views, and the possibilities of sympathetic but also critical engagement with the Party’s and the government’s shifting ways of framing issues, possibilities, priorities, and choices. His blind spots become evident and become even more problematic in the face of the increasing pluralization, complexification, and fluid nature of contemporary contexts, perspectives, social analyses, theoretical developments, and theological articulations. It comes as no surprise that for some scholars and church people in Cuba, Arce’s theological views have lost appeal and relevance.

In my judgment, Arce’s concern over and commitment to the necessary political-economic orientation of any liberation theological discourse is still relevant. As Néstor Míguez argues,

“`The recognition that the class analysis proved to be insufficient on its own, to account for all of the oppressive situations, and that it needs to be completed with other categories and concerns, does not eliminate the fact that economic studies and the category of ‘class’ are still fundamental within the broader play of analytical tools.” \[^31\] \[^31\]Néstor Míguez, “Hacer teología latinoamericana en el tiempo de la globalización,” in El silbo ecuménico del Espíritu: homenaje a José Míguez Bonino, edited by Guillermo Hansen (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Instituto Universitario ISEDET, 2004), 99 (para la bibliografía general: 81-101).
relevance. While the government affirms that, the “updating” of the Cuban economy pursues “the strengthening of socialism,” the dangers of increasingly moving toward a more capitalist type of society are very real, with the subsequent risk of increasingly adopting capitalist values, incentives, institutions, and structures. Caution is necessary at this point. Some liberation theologians remind us that the issue is not to demonize market economic approaches entirely, rather, to condemn their totalizing, fetishist, and excluding tendencies, and the ideological apparatuses and policies that foment and intend to perpetuate them.32

As new socio-political and theological voices begin to reflect on the present Cuban context, they cannot leave out the political economic focus for which Arce fought so much. He is a theological and theoretical ally when critically thinking about the multifarious ways in which God is present/absent in social structures, human’ relations and the way humans relate to the rest of creation. And he can prove useful when reflecting on the churches’ practices/witness of faith today. In that respect, Arce’s legacy is significant. More thoroughly critical analyses of the current political-economic dynamics and web of interrelated issues and rationale of the capitalist world system today and its alternatives need to be incorporated into the theological task.33 These critical approaches may prove useful in assessing the multiple and interconnected historical forms of oppression, exploitation, marginalization, and discrimination, and

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33 Present debates need to enter into in depth analyses of the different and conflicting processes of globalization that are taking place; the multiple political-economic mechanisms of regional integration; the national and international legislations and policies that seek to de/regulate markets (particularly the financial ones); and how these processes intersect other aspects/dimensions of socio-cultural universes, deeply conditioning/affecting peoples’ identities and life. See Giacchino Campese and Pietro Ciallella eds., Migration, Religious Experience, and Globalization (New York, NY: Center for Migration Studies, 2003); B. Shepard and R. Haydukeds., From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization (London, UK: Verso, 2002).
account more intentionally for past and present expressions of resistance to colonizing situations and efforts toward constructing alternatives. As I noted in chapter four, the theoretical/epistemological decolonial turn provides rich theoretical resources as to how to begin to construct these frameworks for the context of Cuba.

An Incipient De-colonial Theology

Arce’s *theology in Revolution* was deeply influenced by European theological and theoretical sources: On one hand, he was influenced by his European Reformed theological heritage with theologians from the sixteenth century such as John Calvin and early to mid-twentieth century scholars such as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Josef Hromádka. On the other hand, his theology was also shaped by the Marxist-Leninist ideology that became official in Cuba during the revolutionary period. Inevitably, his theological work reproduced some Eurocentric colonizing epistemological patterns and theoretical presuppositions, including ideas about the determinant role of economic structures and relations, which he understood as the basis of any other social structures, relations, contradictions, and conflicts. Other issues related to culture, gender and race/ethnicity were practically absent from his theological reflections. He paid little attention to the multiple and complex ethnic, cultural, and spiritual components, traditions and epistemological sources that make up Cuba, Latin America, and the Caribbean. And he underestimated, indeed even seemed to ignore, the complexity of

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35 While the influence of Marxist-Leninist ideology on Arce’s theological thought is undeniable, one could not conclude from it that his ideological views were totally identified–especially, but not only, with regard to religion– with the philosophical/ideological positions defended by the Soviet handbooks of Marxist-Leninist philosophy. See, for example, some of his criticisms of such positions in “Fundamentos bíblicos para una antropología.” For the impact of the “official” dogmatic Soviet Marxism-Leninism upon the teaching of philosophy in Cuban Universities and schools, and its assumption by the government as the official ideology of the political regime, see Pedro Pablo Rodríguez, “Valoración de las tradiciones filosóficas cubanas,” in Raúl Fornet-Betancourt (ed.), *Filosofía, teología, literatura: aportes Cubanos en los últimos cincuenta años*, 54-61.
Latin American and Cuban sociocultural fabrics and multiple intersecting situations-realities of suffering, oppression, and discrimination.

Nevertheless, in my view, Arce’s theology displayed an incipient decolonial orientation in fundamental ways. First, his theological reflections echoed the anti-neocolonialist and anti-imperialist attitudes of the Cuban revolutionary political project. While some proponents of the epistemological decolonial turn to insist on differentiating anti-colonial from decolonial critiques, in my opinion these are not mutually exclusive; the former is a necessary component/ingredient of the latter.36 Second, Arce’s theology signified an effort to elaborate a Cuban theology capable of responding to its own context. In important ways his theological thought represented a hermeneutical/methodological and epistemological de-linking from and disruption of the pervasive European-North Atlantic theologies inherited by the Cuban churches. In doing so, he helped change the very terms of the theological conversation in Cuba. That is, he reconfigured the way in which Cubans construct theological reflections relevant to a Cuban church in the face of a radically different and unexpected social reality, and possibilities for a radical new order encompassing the spiritual, socio-political-economic, and ecological reconstruction of humans. Relatedly, the language he used to articulate his theological views clearly expressed this “de-linking” from and disruption of inherited Eurocentric theologies and theological language.37

Arce’s theological reflection provide new generations of contextual theologians (particularly Cubans) a unique reservoir of insights from which to think about the ways in which the theological task needs to be articulated in light of the current Cuban people’s multiple experiences of faith in God. Today decolonial perspectives can prove

37 See above page 164 in relation to the pastoral character of Arce’s theology.
useful in such a task. A central challenge we face in theology today is the reconfiguration of the very structures of construction, acquisition, and production of theological knowledge, keeping in mind the central role of culture (in its wider meaning) in conditioning theological thought. New theological voices are interrogating the complex daily intersections of multiple subjects, power relations, identities, spiritualities, cultural traditions, symbolic imaginaries, and *epistemes*, all of which are impacted and shaped by socio-cultural constructs that can produce subaltern subjects and historical silences. This decolonizing epistemological/methodological turn is emerging in the context of Cuba, for example, in Clara Ajo’s retrieval of the Afro Cuban traditions in theology.\(^{38}\) Although incipient, these decolonial turns are showing the need for the further de-linking from Eurocentric, homogenizing, universalizing theoretical/theological viewpoints and reconstruction in new terms opening up to be challenged and enriched by other cosmologies, epistemologies, and hermeneutics.

**Concluding Remarks**

Arce’s theological legacy challenges us to actively reconsider how to respond in relevant ways to the present shifting socio-political context of Cuba. The emerging Cuban voices have a solid foundation upon which to continue to elaborate theological reflections suitable for the Cuban church of today and beyond. Theologies in revolution are still needed. They do not need to be named “revolutionary” or “liberation” theologies after Arce’s work, in order to be relevant. They also do not need to uncritically adopt his theoretical framework, interpretations, and statements. It is, however, crucial to take our cue from Arce, in his orientation to opt for the oppressed

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and marginalized, in Cuba and in the world, and to respond to contemporary issues as they emerged in his time: a kind of theological reflection as we walk in the new context. New theological perspectives, drawing on the inspiration of the Bible, must be theologies open to be challenged, reconstituted, and renewed by the presence of the increasing social and theological voices.

In order to be relevant, this new generation of theological voices will have to remain committed to the contextual nature of theology, as Arce was. But they will have to go beyond; they will have to engage in broader theological dialogues with others around the world, and enter into conversations with more complex analytical/interpretive frameworks that will help account for the multiple interrelated ways in which the diverse social dynamics, power relations, including/excluding social structures, discriminatory conceptions/behaviors, and practices of resistance are present in our societies. It is in this way that these theologies will help us reflect and contribute to shed light on the multifaceted salvific grace of God acting in this world. That was part of Arce’s own commitment, and we would be wise to follow his footsteps.
Conclusion

As previous chapters have demonstrated, Sergio Arce has left us with an enormous theological legacy that will prove useful for the task of renewing theology in Cuba (and Latin America). I have engaged in a critical retrieval of his work, keeping in mind the multiple limitations in such exercise due the historical distance and shifts, political-economic reconfigurations in Cuba, and myriad other factors that make it difficult to imagine the context within which Sergio Arce was formed, first articulated and developed his theological ideas.

As I have noted, it is clear that his theological thought did not emerge from a solitary abstract exercise of floating ideas invented in his office. Rather, he was deeply influenced by his earlier personal, spiritual, and theological formation in multiple settings and contexts. He was also shaped by his experiences of the revolutionary process and active participation in the ecumenical movements and organizations in Cuba and elsewhere. Clearly too, Arce’s thinking continued to change in response to the shifting nature of the revolutionary project, and his interactions with scholars from various other theological currents.

As part of his theological formation and development, I also discuss instances in which Arce interacted with other liberation theologians, especially those from Latin America. As shown above, despite the complexity and differences of their respective sociopolitical contexts, Arce’s theology shares much in common with the theological positions of some of these liberation scholars. In particular, they had in common the critique of the situation of political and economic dependency by the Latin American countries, and the need for liberation from capitalist socioeconomic structures as a clear expression of the “option for the poor.” They also agreed on the theological insistence concerning the God of the poor; the historical and holistic character of
salvation/liberation; the need to de-ideologize the Christian faith and the gospel from bourgeois ideological assumptions; and the profound anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist features of their theological reflections.

In the context of these theological conversations, the particularity of Arce’s theology also stands out. The absolute centrality of the Cuban “socialist revolution” as messianic in relation to concerns of salvation-liberation is certainly a more pronounced emphasis than the option formulated by his Latin American counterparts. For him the Cuban revolutionary process was a concrete and incontrovertible manifestation of God’s salvific action in history and a definitive example and expression of the historical project of liberation: and this claim was a central point of contention in the theological debates with his liberation counterparts. Similarly, his adoption and adaptation of “Marxist-Leninist” framework and his reinterpretation of them theologically, mark a significant difference from the perspectives of other theologians in Cuba and other regions. These and other features, however, were not so great as to place him outside the broader currents of liberation theologies.

The distinct features of Arce’s theology as explained above must be considered part and parcel of his theological legacy. His approach to doing theology represented a “revolution” in the Cuban theological revolutionary context. His theology constituted a redefinition and reconstitution of the theological method, and re-formulation of a wide range of theological themes. Nonetheless, what I want to retrieve from Arce’s theological legacy for the newer generations of Cuban scholars—in addition to many other aspects that I do not deal with in-depth in this dissertation and that would be good to retrieve in other studies of his work and that remain relevant for the current context of Cuba—relate more directly to the character of his theology. I refer more concretely to the contextual character of his theology; the pastoral orientation of his reflections, the
reclamation of the biblical text as foundational to theology, and the persistent engagement of political and economic issues as important components of theology.

It is important to note the multiple and complex transformations that have taken place in the context of revolutionary Cuba and the world. Cuba is certainly a very different social, political and economic “reality” than the one under which Arce articulated his theological ideas. So retrieving his theological thought and evaluating his legacy for their relevance today has required surveying the present and the numerous challenges that we face today and exploring the ways in which Arce’s approach can prove a helpful theological source.

To that end, in this dissertation I have drawn on the work of decolonial theorists. Engaging them has helped in clarifying the already existing decolonial tendencies in Arce’s theology and approach which have continuing relevance today. From the beginning there are clear anti-colonial statements and concerns; and an intention to “de-link” or break from inherited approaches to doing theology. At the same time, though, we have to recognize that Arce also reproduced some features of modern colonizing categories, which in significant ways undermined his own theological project. For example, while insisting on context, he tended to speak in unqualified monolithic terms about complex phenomena such as “Socialism,” “Capitalism,” “Revolution,” and “Marxism.” Perhaps over influenced by the official discourse of the “revolution” and the related tendencies toward sweeping abstractions and formulations in binary terms in academic and church circles, he articulated a binary framework too, a heavily polarized framing of the debates and concerns that betrayed the very complexities of his contextual reality. These issues must be taken into consideration by current and upcoming Cuban scholars as they respond theologically to the present and to different possible futures of revolutionary and post-revolutionary Cuba. Moreover, Arce’s
theology is irreducible to his binary and sometimes monolithic framing of the debates, structures, categories and theology. Sometimes, he provides refreshing theological perspective and interpretations that are timely and relevant still today.

As explained in the introduction, this research is part of a larger, more complex process of reformulating theology in Cuba today. This time, it will have to be the confluence of multiply diverse voices, perspectives, interests, and actors that have not until now appeared prominently in the theological landscape of Cuba. Similarly, I propose that this dissertation is also part of the larger process of rethinking the theological task in Latin America and the Caribbean. As I see it, Arce’s work offers important insights and concerns for doing theology outside of Cuba too. As we continue to face the challenges and historical transitions in Cuba and abroad, Arce’s theology can help us to think of possible ways to engage such a process.
Sergio Arce’s Writings


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