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Liberation Theology: Religion, Reform, and Revolution []

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A Research Paper

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*GI 86-10028
April 1986*

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Liberation Theology: Religion, Reform, and Revolution

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A Research Paper

This paper was prepared by
 Office of Global Issues, with
contributions from OGI, and
 Historical Intelligence
Collection. It was coordinated with the Directorate
of Operations.

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**Liberation Theology:
Religion, Reform,
and Revolution**

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Scope Note

The Directorate of Intelligence sponsored a conference on Liberation Theology and Communism in the fall of 1985 to explore the connection between liberation theology and the growth of political instability in the Third World. Of particular concern is the deliberate use of liberation theology by Marxist-Leninist groups to promote revolutionary change. This paper draws on the presentations made at that conference and on discussions with regional specialists to examine the phenomenon of liberation theology and the Popular Church as well as to assess its implications for the United States. Religious publications and other open source literature, including academic studies, provided useful information on this topic.

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**Liberation Theology:
Religion, Reform,
and Revolution**

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Summary

*Information available
as of 21 April 1986
was used in this report.*

Liberation theology was pioneered by Latin American theologians and prelates 20 years ago. It blossomed into a major political and religious movement in the late 1960s and helped spawn radical reform movements in Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Brazil, and Chile. Liberation theology played a role in helping the Sandinistas gain power in Nicaragua and, most recently, in aiding the growth of the insurgency in the Philippines.

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Primarily a Catholic and Latin American phenomenon, liberation theology advocates a radical restructuring of society on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. Rooted in European liberal, social democratic, and Marxist social analysis, it argues that Catholic faith must be validated through political action.

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Although its influence is difficult to quantify, we believe the movement has been a significant force for change, largely because it promotes socioeconomic reform through grassroots political action and joins together two powerfully symbolic forces—Marxism and Christianity. Openly anti-Western, liberation theology identifies the United States and capitalism as primarily responsible for the impoverishment of the Third World.

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We believe that liberation theology—and other radical variants of the movement as found in South Africa and South Korea—can flourish where repressive regimes have blocked progress toward political and social reform and the church provides one of the few places in the community for the disaffected to gather. The movement also is more likely to be influential in countries with charismatic religious leaders and a history of church involvement in politics.

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In our view, the aspect of liberation theology most threatening to political stability in Third World countries is the activist orientation of its practitioners who urge the oppressed to seek a just life now—not in the hereafter—and to use violence to accomplish this goal. Only a small number of clergy, about half of whom are foreign born, actually endorse such use of violence, and their numbers have been declining in recent years, We attribute this decline to the church's increased involvement in social activism, the Vatican's growing criticism of radical forms of liberation theology, and the transition from authoritarian rule to more democratic forms of government in Third

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World countries, such as Brazil and El Salvador. The Vatican's critique of liberation theology—most recently published in its "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation"—is centered around the movement's misuse of the Bible to justify political activism, its focus on temporal liberation, and, particularly, its use of atheistic Marxist analysis. [redacted]

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While liberation theology has served to promote US interests by assisting popular efforts to bring democratic reform to authoritarian states, it also has posed a major threat to US interests by providing a fertile ground for Communist exploitation. In Central America and the Philippines, in particular, we judge that the collaboration of some nuns, missionaries, and members of the clergy with the Marxist revolutionaries has given—and will continue to lend—legitimacy to guerrilla movements, while hampering government efforts to contain them. [redacted]

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Moreover, we believe that the anti-US orientation of the movement and the political naivete of its practitioners make liberation theology an attractive target for Soviet and Cuban manipulation. Although Moscow so far appears to have provided only propaganda support, Cuban President Castro has seized upon liberation theology as a vehicle for rallying anti-US sentiment in Latin America and for exporting the Cuban revolution. In our view, Castro's recent easing of restrictions on the Catholic Church and Cuba's bishops indicates his interest in projecting a better international image and, more important, a growing recognition of the potential influence religious groups can exert to promote and legitimize the revolutionary process in the name of liberation theology. [redacted]

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Liberation Theology: Religion, Reform, and Revolution

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When the Christians have the courage to commit themselves completely to the Latin American revolution, the Latin American revolution will be invincible.

—Che Guevara

What Is Liberation Theology?

Liberation theology is a contemporary Catholic religious doctrine espoused in the Third World. Based on Marxist analysis, it suggests a radical reformation of political, economic, and social structures on behalf of the poor and the oppressed through popular organizing. It is openly anti-West and identifies the United States as responsible for the exploitation of the Third World. Liberation theology enunciates two major themes:

- *Praxis.* The active pursuit of fulfilling political, social, and spiritual needs through concrete, everyday prayerful action and reflection in response to an oppressive situation.
- *Conscientization.* Increasing the political awareness of people to their oppression so that they may better address their human and political needs.

Liberation theology is translated into social action through the Popular Church and its organizational component, “Christian base communities” (comunidades eclesiales de base—CEBs). The term Popular Church usually refers to a movement that encompasses a variety of predominantly Catholic base and peasant communities formed among the poor or by those empathetic to the plight of the poor. The Popular Church provides an ideology (embodied in liberation theology), an institutional mechanism (in the form of Christian base communities), and resources (in the form of mass support) that older church radicals lacked in many parts of Latin America.

Christian base communities function primarily as devotional groups, although some have used the gospel message to critique current political-socioeconomic conditions and to pursue local development projects. Base communities developed as a local response to the shortage of priests and other religious personnel in

Latin America and to the failure of governmental bodies to provide adequate services to the poor. Membership ranges from 15 to 100 in each group; most are located in rural areas and on the outer edges of cities. Usually the groups are led by layworkers and meet at least weekly for prayers, discussion, and action. As a depository of liberation theology, base communities make up the “people’s” or Popular Church, which can be distinguished from the hierarchical Church by its commitment to radical change.

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Base communities are set up as parallel institutions to government and church structures to create local civic responsibility and to provide services. In some cases, this arrangement has served to weaken government and official Church authority. Base communities also can pose a direct threat to the regime by promoting armed struggle or by producing revolutionary leaders. Many, however, restrict their political role to human rights monitoring, organizing labor protests, establishing cooperatives and credit unions, providing health care and education, fundraising, supporting solidarity campaigns, publishing, and other reform activities.

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Liberation theology presents a challenge to government leaders in the Third World largely because it advocates a new social order based on grassroots political activism. Proponents of liberation theology, however, usually have only a vague notion of the political model they espouse, and, in our view, their lack of a pragmatic socioeconomic plan often is exploited by radicals bent on bringing Marxist-style governments to power. In fact, this dynamic has led to the development of radical reform movements in Guatemala, El Salvador, Brazil, and Chile, and it has aided the growth of insurgency in the Philippines. Activist priests and communities motivated by liberation theology also played an important role in helping the Sandinistas gain power in Nicaragua.

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¹ A detailed account of the growth and current status of liberation theology in Nicaragua, the Philippines, El Salvador, Guatemala, Chile, and Brazil appears in appendix A.

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**Milestones in the Evolution of
Liberation Theology Doctrine**

- **1962-65.** *Second Vatican Council.* Committed the Catholic Church to the plight of the poor and oppressed and transferred some liturgical responsibilities to the laity. Also adopted a "middle way," rejecting both rigid capitalism and bureaucratic socialism.
- **April 1963.** *Pacem in Terris encyclical of Pope John XXIII.* Establishes a comprehensive theory of human rights. It generally reflects social democratic legal and moral norms accepted in the Western democracies and has been used by Catholics and others to assess the performance of particular regimes and political movements, especially in Latin America.
- **March 1967.** *Populorum Progressio (The Progress of Peoples) encyclical of Pope Paul VI.* Discusses "the scandal of glaring inequalities" noted during the Pope's trips to Latin America and Africa. Expresses an urgency to alleviate the plight of the poor and suffering. Insists the wealth of rich countries should be placed at the service of poor nations. Denounces "liberal capitalism" and blames developed countries for exploiting the economies of underdeveloped states.
- **October 1968.** *Medellin CELAM II Conference of Latin American Bishops.* Gave an official impetus to the emergence of liberation theology and condemned both capitalism and atheistic Marxism as political-economic systems, but enunciated a "preferential option for the poor" and support for Christian base communities.
- **1971.** *Theology of Liberation, a seminal book on the topic that coins the phrase.* Published by Peruvian priest and theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez.
- **May 1971.** *Octogesima Adveniens, a papal document by Pope Paul VI.* States that both "bureaucratic socialism" and "technocratic capitalism" as systems have failed to create adequate justice and equality. It calls for creative "utopian" thinking that would go beyond present systems and ideologies.
- **November 1971.** *Synod of Catholic bishops in Rome.* Created a document on "Justice in the World" that recognizes the violence and oppression created by "unjust systems and structures."
- **1976.** *First Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.* Criticized the cultural domination of European and North American theologies. Called for a new theology out of an active commitment to justice through solidarity with the poor and the prevention of exploitation, racism, sexism, and all forms of oppression and domination.
- **1977.** *Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, Accra, Ghana.* Organized by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. Called for a unique African theology based on the struggles of people in their resistance against structures of racial domination.
- **January 1979.** *First Asian meeting of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians in Sri Lanka.* Conference developed an Asian "liberating" theology and accepted basic Marxist criteria but questioned whether its class approach is appropriate to the liberation of women and minorities.
- **February 1979.** *Puebla CELAM III Conference.* Approved the concept of Christian base communities (comunidades eclesiales de base—CEBs) and continued the emphasis on political and social activism.
- **1980.** *Fourth Congress of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, Sao Paulo, Brazil.* Discussed Christian base communities as "the place people find space for resistance, struggle, and hope in the face of domination." Called the historical activity of liberation an essential, albeit transitional, step to the Kingdom of God.
- **1981.** *Fifth Congress of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians Conference, New Delhi, India.* Discussed the results of five years of work and set guidelines for the future. Topic was "Irruption of the Third World."
- **September 1984.** "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation," better known as The Ratzinger Report. Vatican document that criticizes liberation theology's efforts to replace the hierarchical Church with the Popular Church; its attention to violent means of restoring justice; its misuse of the Bible to justify political acts; its preoccupation with temporal liberation; and, especially, its use of atheistic Marxist ideology.
- **April 1986.** "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation" reaffirms the role of the Church in improving the plight of oppressed peoples, as expressed in the 1984 Instruction, but states that nuns and clergy should not intervene directly in politics. Warns against totalitarianism and revolution leading to "new forms of slavery," condemns systematic recourse to violence, and declares that armed struggle is to be used only as a last resort.

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What Are Its Origins?

Liberation theology originated in Latin America in the mid-1960s.² It was conceived and enunciated by theologians and activist priests, such as Peru's Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez and Brazil's Fr. Leonardo Boff. Its roots can be traced to Catholic deliberations and pronouncements, particularly the Second Vatican Council, 1962-65; the Conferences of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) at Medellin, Colombia, in 1968 and Puebla, Mexico, in 1979; and the practical work of activist priests and religious orders. Such activists and documents urge all Catholics to become proponents of the poor by resisting exploitative capitalism, defending human rights, and criticizing unfair development policies. They also call for substantial political and economic reform in Latin America. [redacted]

Liberation theology is rooted in European liberal, social democratic, and Marxist social analysis. Writings of liberation theologians draw heavily from the dependency theory, which holds that Latin American underdevelopment can be blamed primarily on the activities and decisions of foreign capitalist countries—especially the United States—and multinational corporations. Liberation theology advocates recently have pointed to the Third World debt crisis as the latest manifestation of Western exploitation of the Third World. Their writings contend that US persistence in requiring Latin nations to repay their debt imposes burdensome conditions on the poor. [redacted]

How Extensive Is the Phenomenon?

Primarily a Catholic and Latin American phenomenon, we believe liberation theology has flourished most in countries where repressive, authoritarian political systems have sparked growing political and social conflict and where the church provides one of the few meetingplaces for the community.³ It appears most influential in countries where charismatic religious or lay church leaders, missionaries, and the official Catholic Church have played a significant political role. [redacted]

² See appendix B for a list of selected readings on the evolution and current status of liberation theology. [redacted]

³ Some Protestant groups also have begun to espouse liberation theology. Traditionally, more independent and evangelical than their Catholic counterparts, we believe some Third World Protestant Church organizations have the potential to develop into a major force for change. [redacted]

According to an official Catholic Church study, the number of active radical priests in countries where liberation theology has a high profile—Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Brazil, and Chile—dropped from a near majority in the late 1960s and 1970s to less than 25 percent in 1982. An academic study completed in 1985 estimates that only about 10 percent of the clergy throughout Latin America now actively support liberation theology; half of these proponents are foreign missionaries, primarily from North America and Europe. The study also states that half of Latin American Catholic theologians—whom we believe wield considerable influence as intellectuals and as churchmen—support the teachings of the Popular Church. Most of the remainder were characterized by the study as sympathetic. [redacted]

We believe the decline in the number of radical church activists is, in some countries, a result of liberalizing democratic trends, popular expectations that social and economic conditions will improve, and the Vatican's unwillingness to sanction a Third World theology. In our view, the Sandinista regime's economic failures and repression of internal opponents—including the traditional Church—also have undercut support for liberation theology in Nicaragua, which had been touted as a model for political change. In addition, the Vatican's public repudiation of priests and nuns who hold both political and church offices has had a major dampening effect, according to knowledgeable observers (figure 1). [redacted]

Although the Vatican has publicly affirmed the tenets of liberation theology that emphasize the needs of the poor and the necessity for social reform, Pope John Paul II and other Vatican authorities have criticized proponents of liberation theology for misusing the Bible, identifying the Kingdom of God with temporal liberation movements, and supporting the use of violence to correct injustices. Pope John Paul II took the opportunity to critique liberation theology at the Puebla Conference in Mexico in 1979. He condemned social injustice and oppression and approved of priests organizing and promoting the interests of the poor but admonished clergy to avoid politics. As a citizen of Poland, the Pope is wary that Marxist-Leninist ideas may be naively proposed as Christian solutions to economic and social problems. [redacted]

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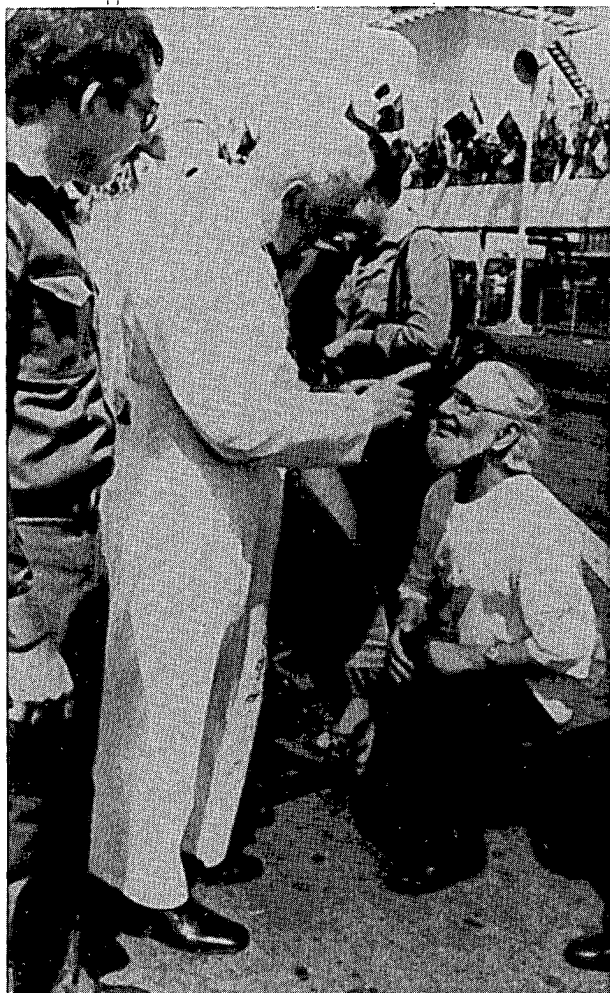


Figure 1. (Top) Ernesto Cardenal, Minister of Culture, exhorting the masses in Leon, Nicaragua. (Bottom) During Pope John Paul II's 1983 trip to Central America, he admonished Cardenal for his radical activities.

Camera Press ©

In 1984, the Vatican removed seven priests from teaching positions at Catholic universities and silenced Brazilian liberation theologian Fr. Leonardo Boff for doctrinal errors in their teachings. Although Boff's penance has since been lifted, the Catholic Church continues to promote clergy and theologians who hold conservative views on liberation theology, as evidenced by the recent elevation of a few Latin American bishops to cardinal—including Cardinal Obando y Bravo of Nicaragua. [redacted]

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The Vatican elaborated its views in the "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation" published in April. The Instruction takes a more positive approach toward theologies of liberation in that it validates the role of the Church in promoting individual freedoms. Although it affirms the right of the oppressed to revolt, it cautions against revolutionary movements that violate human rights and produce "new forms of slavery"—a statement many knowledgeable observers have interpreted as a direct criticism of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. [redacted]

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In Central America, the number of Catholic priests is few (averaging about 300 per country), compared with the total population. The ratio of Catholics to priests in this region is close to 7,300:1. We believe the impact of those who are radicalized is much greater than these numbers may suggest. Many of the most radical activists are missionaries and laypersons directly involved in aiding the poor. The public testimony of revolutionary leaders, books written by radicalized clergy, and captured guerrilla documents show that the activists have used the Popular Church to organize political opposition throughout Central America and to support the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and guerrilla movements in El Salvador and Guatemala. [redacted]

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In Asia, Christianity is practiced by only 5 percent of the population, and the Catholic Church has not been a major catalyst for promoting political change. Nevertheless, liberation theology has developed a significant following in the Philippines and is beginning to take hold in South Korea, where Christians make up

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some 83 and 25 percent of the population, respectively. In both countries, advocates of liberation theology have been motivated primarily by government human rights abuses and by the regime's insensitivity to popular grievances. Elsewhere in Asia and also in Africa, some priests actively espouse liberation theology doctrine, but most manifestations of the movement—Christian base communities, challenges to the hierarchical Church, emphasis on the responsibility Christians have toward the poor, and involvement in labor and peasant organizations—are limited or non-existent. [redacted]

What Conditions Favor Its Growth?

Our research indicates that key societal factors promoting the spread of liberation theology—and other, parallel radical Christian movements—appear to be the presence of a sizable Catholic (or Christian) population, a history of church involvement in politics, widespread social and economic grievances, and a repressive political system. Because liberation theology is mostly a Catholic phenomenon, individuals in predominantly Catholic countries are more likely to be exposed to the doctrine of the Popular Church as well as the international flow of missionaries and publications (see map). Countries where liberation theology is not yet a significant political force that have a large Catholic population and a recent history of church activism include Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and Zaire. Church activists in Mexico, Colombia, and Peru also have publicly protested government restrictions on political freedoms and social opportunities. [redacted]

In many Third World countries, the church traditionally has been an active proponent of agrarian reform and wealth redistribution. The level of church activism usually corresponds to the ability of radical church and lay leaders to organize the people as well as to the degree of repression and poverty present in the society. In countries where liberation theology focuses on gaining people their political, economic, and social rights, we believe the movement is most likely to prosper. Conversely, in countries, such as El Salvador, where the transition to democratic rule has progressed and the level of government repression has subsided, the radical clergy have found less political support for their cause. [redacted]

**Countries Where Liberation Theology
Could Become Politically Significant**

<i>Latin America</i>	<i>Colombia</i> <i>Ecuador</i> <i>Mexico</i> <i>Peru</i>
<i>Africa</i>	<i>South Africa</i> <i>Zaire</i>
<i>Asia</i>	<i>Sri Lanka</i> <i>South Korea</i>

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[redacted]

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In our view, liberation theology also will flourish in countries where the Church membership is divided between supporters of the Vatican and the Popular Church. This schism represents a first step in the restructuring of society by challenging the hierarchical nature of the official Church and elite Church members supportive of government policies. In such countries, leaders of the Popular Church are more likely to condone civil unrest and insurgency. For example, in Ecuador, Colombia, and Sri Lanka, Catholic priests and missionaries have publicly sanctioned and even participated in demonstrations and guerrilla groups, according to press statements. Most priests, however, have avoided leadership roles when more violent means of antiregime protest are employed. [redacted]

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Our research indicates other factors closely associated with the emergence of liberation theology—and its Christian variants—as a force for political change relate to specific church activities or attitudes. Liberation theology generally has prospered in societies where the church is uniquely suited to provide a central gathering place, a routine meeting schedule, or an individual authority figure for expressing and organizing political protest. By providing public and

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Key Questions for Assessing Where Liberation Theology Could Become Politically Significant

Background Factors

- *Is the percentage of Christians, especially Catholics, in the total population high?*
- *Does the Church have a history of involvement in politics?*
- *Does the presence of extreme poverty, human rights violations, and trade dependency suggest blockages in the political system inhibiting reform?*
- *Is there an active insurgency or a high degree of civil unrest?*

Tactical Indicators

- *Does the Church provide the primary locus for organizing and expressing discontent with the regime?*
- *Do proponents emphasize the revolutionary mission of the Church through propaganda and public statements?*
- *Do they share an anticapitalist, anti-West orientation?*
- *Do proponents advocate the use of violence to promote change?*

[Redacted]

social services to the people, parochial base communities often subsume the role of the government and the official Church hierarchy. For example, ethnic groups in Zaire function in much the same way as base community networks in that they depend on the church to provide educational and medical services not offered by the government. In Mexico, public statements of some activist bishops reveal their use of the Church as a platform to encourage parishoners to form Christian base communities tied to leftist political parties, and to adopt the ideals of the Popular Church in Latin America. Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador also are developing effective Christian base community networks. [Redacted]

Another key characteristic of liberation theology movements is the role of the church in translating religious doctrine into social action that addresses the immediate needs of the community. Radical clergy and laity often deemphasize the life hereafter and use liberation theology to mobilize mass protest around traditional political issues, such as discrimination, ethnic hostilities, and nationalism. Several open sources report that a theology of liberation has been invoked in South Africa to support the cause of black liberation. Open sources also report that in South Korea it has become attuned to ethnic Korean nationalism, including reunification, and a more assertive cultural identity. [Redacted]

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In our view, liberation theology also has the potential to become a significant phenomenon in countries where dissident priests or lay leaders emphasize the revolutionary mission of the Church and advocate anticapitalist, Marxist doctrine. Evidence of such practice is most apparent in Latin America, where liberation theology literature often depicts Christ as a political liberator in fatigues and priests as armed militia leaders (figure 2). In Ecuador, for example, insurgents use religious symbols in their literature and invoke religious language to garner support for their cause. In addition, radical supporters of the Tamil insurgents in Sri Lanka also have incorporated extremist religious symbols—for example, a crucified female figure—in their publications to symbolize liberation struggles. Moreover, Latin American theologians and lay activists often criticize the United States and multinational corporations for taking economic advantage of Third World countries—citing the debt issue in particular. [Redacted]

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Such practices have created serious schisms within the Latin American Catholic Church hierarchy, according to Church and press statements. For example, the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops is divided on the revolutionary role of the Church; some members oppose the Church's involvement in politics, while others associate openly with socialist leaders and espouse Marxist doctrine. Moreover, in Colombia, the Catholic Church discredits those who support the radical tenets of liberation theology by openly associating them with insurgent movements. [Redacted]

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Two Christian Variants of Liberation Theology

In South Africa, black nationalism is the driving force behind the recent call for a theology of liberation by a predominantly black group of 151 clergymen and theologians who represent several Christian denominations, including the prominent Dutch Reformed Church. We believe liberation theology is assisting the cause for racial reform in this predominantly Protestant country largely because the church offers one of the few forums for nonwhite South Africans to engage in politics. Drawing from liberation theology's emphasis on addressing the needs of the oppressed, church leaders are attempting to link liberation theology's themes of faith and rebellion directly to civil rights issues. According to open sources, a few church leaders are no longer willing to condemn the use of violence to protest oppression. Although divisions among black communities and the lack of a central religious authority work against the establishment of Latin American-style liberation theology, we believe the church's involvement in the movement lends greater credibility to the black cause.

In South Korea, we judge that government internal security controls and the generally conservative and secular nature of the Korean people have precluded the direct adaptation of liberation theology as practiced in Latin America. In particular, strong anti-Communist sentiments remain among a number of Korean Christians forced to flee North Korea. Nevertheless, a religious political philosophy, called minjung or people's theology, has taken hold among an activist Christian minority. While minjung theology reflects some of the same concerns as liberation theology in the area of human rights and political awareness, a close reading of open sources suggests it subsumes individual interests for the good of the Korean people, is populist, and draws upon some Marxist themes while claiming to be anti-Communist.

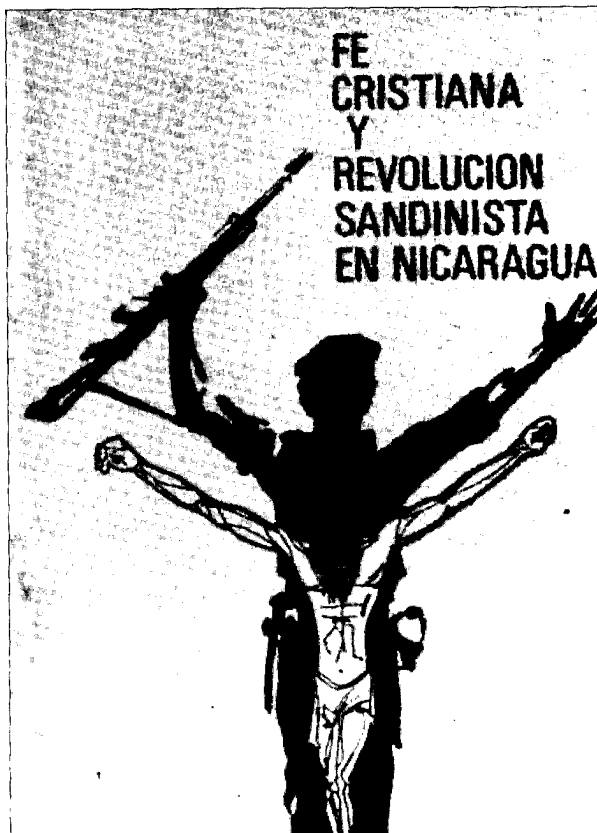


Figure 2. "The Christian Faith and the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua."

We believe the aspect of liberation theology most threatening to political stability is the tendency of radical leaders to condone the use of violence to promote political change. Some Catholic religious orders openly supported Catholic participation in the revolution that brought the Sandinistas to power. The Nicaraguan Catholic bishops also supported the anti-Somoza cause, as articulated in a November 1979 pastoral letter. Moreover, radical Mexican bishops have voiced support for the violent actions of leftist revolutionaries in nearby countries, although Mexican clerics are restricted from making any political pronouncements. And, in Sri Lanka, a few clergy have publicly defended the rights of Tamils to employ violence to protest human rights and property abuses by the Sinhalese, according to Catholic missionary publications and tracts.

What Is the International Connection?

The rapid flow of information across international boundaries, the widespread influence of the Catholic Church, and the global reach of missionary orders have facilitated the spread of liberation theology. Sympathy for the needs of the poor and support for the goals of the movement extend well beyond the countries in which the Popular Church is active, as evidenced by North American and European parishes who openly send church contributions to their counterparts in Latin America. Many of these congregations are unwitting that some of these funds go to support radical activities. According to the public testimony of an ex-Sandinista, the Sandinista commanders promoted almost 50 solidarity committees in the United States that, along with committees on other continents, would funnel donated monies and material support from nonleftist and leftist sources to the Sandinistas through an office in Costa Rica and a bank under the name of Fr. Ernesto Cardenal. International commissions formed by concerned religious bodies like CELAM also have published findings based on inspection trips that usually are more critical of abuses committed by government forces than those attributed to the guerrillas. [redacted]

Latin American advocates of liberation theology have spread their precepts through a number of international Christian socialist action groups. One of the leading movements, Christians for Socialism, was formed in 1972 in Chile. Spurred by the Chilean experience and by growing opposition to capitalism, this movement promoted socialism as a guiding principle of reform. Open sources reveal that its members range in their commitment and political orientation from militant Marxist-Leninists to pacifist social democrats. Membership figures are not documented but, in our view, probably are in the tens of thousands. Sympathetic groups identified in open sources also exist in several West European countries including Holland, Belgium, and Spain, as well as Africa and Asia. They maintain contact with each other through an international bulletin, *Liaisons Internationales*. [redacted]

In recent years, according to press accounts, Christians for Socialism has become less active. Its role as a source of information and moral support for liberation theology and related causes has been partly supplanted by a Netherlands-based organization of Catholic theologians called Concilium. Concilium was formed in the wake of Vatican II. Since the early 1970s, its dominant orientation has shifted to the left and currently includes several liberation theologians on its editorial board, notably the most prominent writer on the subject, Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez. [redacted]

[redacted] Catholic aid agencies based in Western Europe have funded many Church activities that have challenged the authority of Third World governments. Most of the official Catholic aid—totaling \$500-750 million annually—comes from organizations belonging to the multinational consortium headquartered in Brussels known as The International Cooperation for Solidarity and Development (CIDSE), or the Vatican's coordinating body for humanitarian aid, Caritas Internationalis. Both organizations have supported efforts to organize labor unions, to raise political consciousness through educational programs, and to criticize government policies through media placements. The 1985 academic study shows that many donor agencies give high priority to projects that directly address the causes of oppression and suffering. As a result, funds have flowed to political reform-oriented solidarity groups, the liberation theology press, and Christian base communities. The study documents that some funds and materiel resources have gone to Marxist guerrilla groups and Marxist regimes, notably the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. [redacted]

What Is the Soviet/Cuban Role?

The political naivete of some theologians and priests and the anti-US stance make liberation theology an attractive target for socialist exploitation. Traditional Marxist-Leninist antipathy toward religion, however, has limited Soviet efforts to support the activities of

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the Popular Church. Until recently, Moscow's support appears to have been limited mostly to propaganda. The Soviets have chronicled the development of liberation theology in Latin America in *Latinskaya Amerika* (the journal of the Soviet Institute of Latin America of the Academy of Science) but remain skeptical of its revolutionary potential. *Izvestiya*, TASS, and *Pravda* have made references to Christian "believers" who support socialism. They also have highlighted differences between the radical, "progressive" clergy and the conservative, "reactionary" hierarchy, and noted the significance of liberation theology in the context of Nicaragua and South Africa. To date, however, no authoritative party statement has been issued on the subject. In a book published in Moscow last year and translated into Spanish, *The Catholic Church and the Liberation Movement in Latin America*, the Soviet author states that Communists can be united with Christians in the popular struggle through an anti-imperialist front. [redacted]

Cuban President Castro's use of liberation theology to promote his image as a regional leader and to export the Cuban revolution—notably at the Havana Conference on Latin American debt in July 1985—doubtless has heightened Soviet awareness of the potential benefits of a strategic alliance with the Popular Church. Interviews with Castro, recently published in *Fidel and Religion*, reveal that he is influenced by liberation theology but has little substantive understanding of the topic. Therefore, we believe he has every incentive to use the church to further the socialist revolution in Latin America. Castro remains impressed by the role the Catholic Church played in overthrowing the Somoza regime and has cited Nicaragua in his book as an example of successful Church-state collaboration. He also discusses the potential for religious groups to provide the catalyst for revolutionary change and suggests that Christianity has more in common with Communism than capitalism. [redacted]

Although the Cuban Government still severely restricts religious celebrations and the activities of church members, events within the past two years suggest that Castro is trying to project a more moderate image by easing some restrictions. In January 1985, the Cuban Government established an Office of Religious Affairs as a department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party to discourage discrimination against those who hold reli-

gious beliefs. The same month, US bishops were invited to visit Cuba and meet with Castro; they also met with Cuba's religious hierarchy at an official reception—the first such gathering since 1959. The visit received much attention in domestic and foreign press. The government also, in September 1985, permitted Cuba's bishops to attend a bishops conference in the United States and, in February, allowed a Cuban National Ecclesiastical Meeting to be held in Havana. The meeting addressed the role of the Catholic Church in Cuba and Church-state relations and was described by participants as a milestone in the history of the Cuban Catholic Church. [redacted]

Some Concerns for the Future

With half of the 825 million Catholics worldwide living in the poverty-stricken and politically unstable nations of the Third World, we believe a ready constituency exists for the social and political changes advocated by liberation theology. In our view, the underprivileged and their revolutionary leaders will continue to be attracted to its promises of reform, its reliance on Marxist terminology, and its harsh criticism of US development policies. Although the Sandinistas have not had much success in replacing the traditional Church with the Popular Church, we believe that liberation theology will continue to have an impact in the Third World because it promotes socioeconomic reform through grassroots action and joins together two powerfully symbolic forces—Marxism and Christianity. [redacted]

Liberation theology, in our view, is likely to prove most attractive in countries where improvements in conditions for the poor and oppressed are advocated by activist clergy, religious orders, or the laity to reform—or supplant—a repressive society. In Latin America and the Philippines, we judge that the collaboration of some members of the Catholic Church with Marxist revolutionaries will continue to give guerrilla movements legitimacy, while hampering government efforts to contain them. Elsewhere in the Third World, we also would expect variants of the Latin American model of liberation theology to develop. In Africa, for example, much greater emphasis is given to black nationalism and the inculturation of Christianity into African society. In Asia, liberation theology functions in a radically different environment where Christians make up a distinct minority and Eastern religions predominate. [redacted]

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The aspect of such theologies of liberation that we believe most threatening to Third World countries is the activist orientation of its practitioners who urge the oppressed to seek a just life now—not in the hereafter—and use violence to accomplish this goal. Radical religious leaders and laity are likely to have the most impact in societies where the church provides leadership, organizational structures, and public services normally performed by the government.

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According to knowledgeable church observers, however, only a small number of Catholic clergy actually endorse the use of violence to promote revolutionary change, and their numbers have been declining in recent years. As the official Catholic Church has become more involved in social activism, the Vatican has increased its criticism of the radical Popular Church, and, as authoritarian regimes have been replaced, the more radical precepts of liberation theology have begun to lose their attraction. We expect this trend to continue.

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Liberation theology can pose a serious threat to US interests when its critique of capitalism and US development policy finds a receptive audience and, more important, when the movement's inability to articulate a political-economic model for restructuring society provides an opening for Communist exploitation. We believe Moscow's recent experience with the Polish prelature has increased its awareness of the symbolic importance of the Catholic Church and how it can be used to support secular political reform. We also believe the division between the two churches in Latin America—a people's church with strong socialist precepts and an official Church with allegiance to the Vatican—may present a tactical opportunity for the Soviets to form a united front against the host government.

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On the other hand, liberation theology can promote US interests by assisting popular efforts to bring democratic rule to authoritarian states. In Brazil, for example, the theology of liberation has played an important role in supporting the recent transition from military to civilian rule, and it currently is generating more participation in the political process at the grassroots level through the spread of base communities.

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Appendix A

Country Profiles

Nicaragua

The forging of a strategic alliance between Catholics and Sandinista revolutionaries did not come about until the late 1960s, spawned by the abuses of the Somoza regime. Knowledgeable observers give most of the credit to Fr. Ernesto Cardenal, who—inspired partly by the examples of slain Colombian priest and guerrilla fighter Camilo Torres and Cuban revolutionary leader Che Guevara—established a small parish and contemplative community in the Solentiname archipelago in Lake Nicaragua in 1965. Cardenal wrote a book of sermons in which he described his experiences in Solentiname and developed the themes that Christ was the first revolutionary; that His Kingdom can be established on earth and not in the hereafter; and that Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and their colleagues have made a proper start in that direction. [redacted]

According to Cardenal's own testimony, he was invited by Sandinista leaders to join their movement in 1969, making Solentiname a training ground for Sandinista youth. He also admits that after his visit to Cuba his community participated in several military operations against Somoza's National Guard, including an unsuccessful attack in 1977 against the San Carlos military barracks. Cardenal has publicly endorsed the use of violence as a legitimate response to societal injustices. [redacted]

Ernesto's brother Fernando, a Jesuit priest, was the second prominent cleric to join the Sandinistas. In 1970, open sources report that Fernando led a student occupation of the National Cathedral to protest the holding of political prisoners. He later became a member of the Sandinistas, and in 1972 he founded the Revolutionary Christian Movement, which provided a major source of guerrilla recruits and a propaganda outlet for portraying the insurgents as Christian revolutionaries. [redacted]

In the mid-1970s, Sandinista officials openly acknowledged that they developed strong ties to Popular Church activists in the countryside where the government and mainstream Church hierarchy could exert less control over their activities. The base communities, as the organizational component of the Popular Church, provided a readymade network for the Sandinista movement and radical church activities; revolutionaries also found it easier to go into the barrios when operating under the Church's banner. Moreover, Church publications report that pastoral workers organized rural workers' committees and peasants' congresses; church members also used churches for sit-ins and as safehavens for the guerrillas. Public statements and writings of radical church leaders reveal how they worked in urban areas to organize slumdwellers and to recruit manpower for the revolution. [redacted]

Miguel d'Escoto, a prominent Nicaraguan cleric, became a member of the movement in 1979. Former Director of Social Communications for the Maryknoll Order and founder of Orbis Books, d'Escoto was the principal English-language publisher of works on liberation theology. He also helped set up solidarity committees in the United States and elsewhere to raise funds for the movement. [redacted]

By the late 1970s, Catholic religious orders—including Jesuits, Maryknolls, Capuchins, and Trappists—organized hundreds of study groups, youth clubs, and Christian base communities to promote social action and apply pressure to the Somoza government. Several other priests and nuns, both Nicaraguan and foreign born, became directly involved in the movement, according to the writings of church activists. Some moved into political positions, a few died in combat, one became chaplain and militia leader of a small town, and another became Chief of the Cadre Section of the Sandinista Armed Forces General Staff (figure 3). [redacted]

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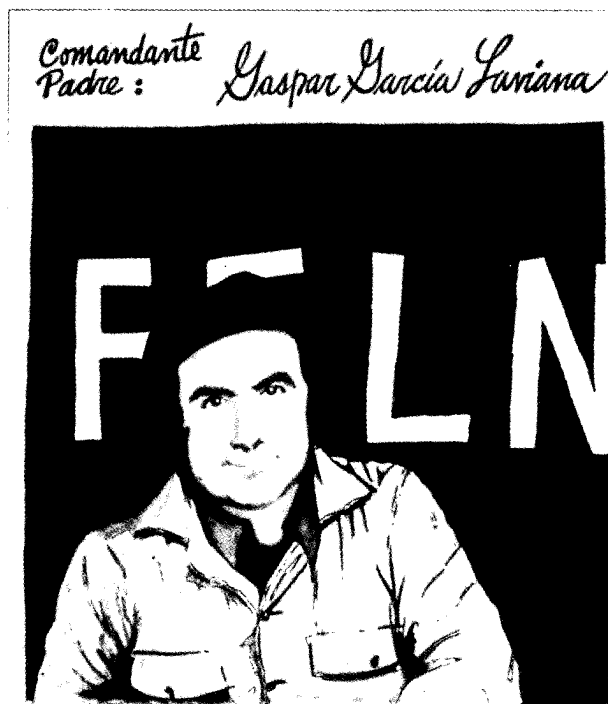


Figure 3. Spanish-born Fr. Garcia Laviana joined the Sandinistas in December 1977 and was killed in combat on the southern front the following year. [redacted]

When the Sandinistas came to power in 1979, Ernesto Cardenal was named Minister of Culture and d'Escoto became Foreign Minister. Fernando Cardenal was director of the Sandinista literacy campaign until his appointment as Minister of Education much later—in July 1984. Since the revolution, these clerics have sought to perpetuate the alliance between the Church and the Sandinista movement by publicly endorsing the Popular Church, manipulating the Catholic press for Sandinista indoctrination, modifying religious holidays for political celebrations, and directing key institutions—including Nicaragua's only Jesuit university—to continue promoting liberation theology. D'Escoto is ardent in his public criticism of the official Catholic Church in Nicaragua and its titular head, Cardinal Obando y Bravo. Several Nicaraguans, including the Cardinal, have publicly accused d'Escoto of leading a campaign to intimidate the Church. Banned from saying mass by the Vatican,

d'Escoto recently led a 320-kilometer, "way-of-the-cross" walk from Jalapa south to Managua with Catholics who supported the Sandinista regime and fasted in protest against the official Church. [redacted]

In a recent pro-Sandinista film, *Thank God and the Revolution*, Nicaraguan Interior Minister Tomas Borge comments on the alliance between Christian revolutionaries and Sandinistas and the possibility of exporting the revolutionary process in Latin America. He states, "It's an integration which will serve as an example for many revolutionary processes in Latin America. In the long run, there are many common aims, and the differences are negligible when both the revolution and the Church are on the side of the poor." [redacted]

At present, however, the Catholic Church is openly divided. In public statements and sermons, Nicaraguan religious leaders are increasingly critical of the Sandinista regime—especially since the Catholic radio station was shut down—while a relatively small group of parish-level priests, nuns, and layworkers in some 2,000 Christian base communities continue to support the government through the Popular Church. Although the Popular Church structure has replaced some official Church functions, such as celebrating mass and organizing prayer and Bible study groups, the Popular Church will not, in our judgment, supplant Vatican authority. [redacted]

Cardinal Obando y Bravo, who formerly collaborated with Ernesto Cardenal in supporting the Sandinista revolution, now reflects the Vatican's concern by publicly criticizing the Sandinista leaders for their Marxist-Leninist indoctrination, use of violence, excessive alignment with Cuba and its allies, and harassment of clergy and laity, including censorship of official Church media. In writings and public sermons, some priests formerly sympathetic to the revolution also have moderated their support for the regime because of government repression, its support for foreign subversion, the manipulation of elections, and the persecution of the English-speaking Indian population. Liberation theology activists claim, however, that about one-fifth of the population still supports the ideals of the Popular Church. [redacted]

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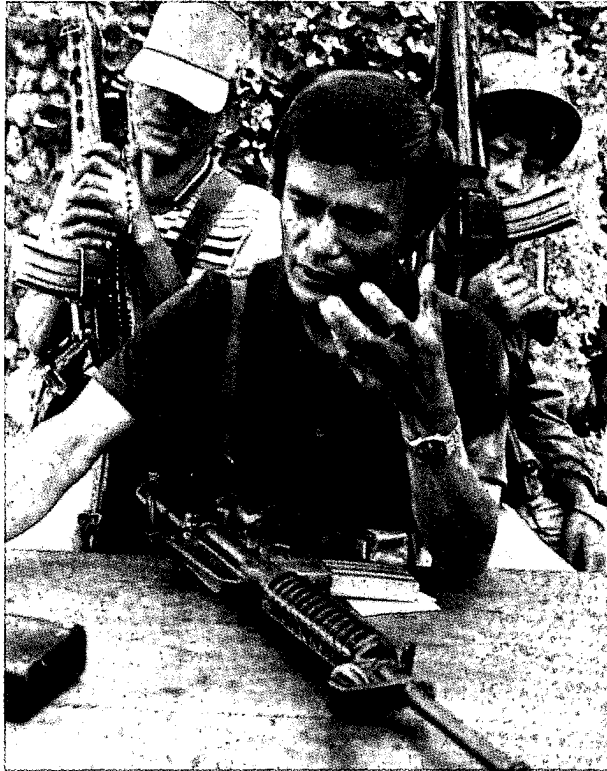


Figure 4. Philippine priest Father Conrado Balweg flanked by two New People's Army guerrillas. The Economist ©

With the fall of the Marcos regime, these church activists will have to decide whether to seek political, social, and economic reform through legitimate channels or continue the revolutionary struggle. They might find it difficult in the near term to marshal support for radical activity in view of the Church's role in overthrowing the Marcos regime and its influence in bringing President Aquino to power. However, if radical church activists opt for revolutionary change, in our judgment, their greatest impact will lie in the enhanced legitimacy their involvement brings to the Communist cause.

El Salvador

Since the mid-1970s, Church activists have filled important posts in the mass organizations and combat units of the two largest Salvadoran guerrilla groups—the Popular Liberation Forces and the People's Revolutionary Army. In 1974, Church activists led a coalition forming the United Popular Action Front—the mass organization now subordinate to the Armed

Forces of National Resistance guerrilla faction—and held their first meeting in a church, according to public testimony.

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Embassy reporting and open literature identify several priests either serving with or openly sympathetic toward the guerrillas. They include:

- Fr. Ernesto Barrera, a member of the Popular Liberation Forces, who was killed in combat in November 1978.
- Fr. Luis de Sebastian, vice rector of the Jesuit-run University of Central America in San Salvador, who has served as the official representative of the political arm of the umbrella guerrilla organization in New York and several West European countries.
- Fr. Placido Erdozain, the author of a progueerrilla profile of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero who was assassinated in March 1980; Erdozain blames the United States for the assassination.

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The radical clergy, however, did not find the political support necessary for revolution. Instead, as in the case of Nicaragua, public statements and Church writings suggest that Church activist support for the Marxist revolutionaries in El Salvador has declined in recent years.

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Public reaction against liberation theology has been led by Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas of San Salvador. When he succeeded the assassinated Archbishop Romero as titular head of the Salvadoran Catholic Church in 1980, Rivera y Damas publicly questioned whether the leftist insurrection was consistent with Catholic moral teaching. Since then, he has given increasing support to those seeking democratic reform. Radical priests have been shunted from key Church positions, including teaching assignments in the seminary and control of Church-sponsored human rights organizations. Rivera also has publicly discouraged—but not formally prohibited—priests from serving as chaplains in guerrilla areas. [redacted]

In August 1985, El Salvador's seven Catholic bishops issued a pastoral letter abandoning their neutrality in the guerrilla war, coming out in favor of the government. The bishops criticized the left for manipulating Christian priests and layworkers and called for a renewal of a dialogue between the government and the guerrillas. Although talks were broken off in November, the Church continues to act as an informal channel of communication. [redacted]

Guatemala

In the 1970s human rights abuses under military governments disaffected many priests and nuns and led several to join the guerrilla movement. According to US Embassy reporting, the military juntas, which tended to equate Christian charity with subversive activity, were quick to suppress activist clergymen. Under President Lucas Garcia, for example, the US Embassy reported the disappearance or murder of 13 priests and one nun. [redacted]

Today, liberation theology retains some influence, but is being eclipsed by the appeal of evangelical Protestantism—which stresses reform through self-help—and government suppression of Popular Church activities. The official Church has limited itself to the periodic issuance of pastoral letters aimed at raising the “moral consciousness” of the government. According to the US Embassy, the Catholic hierarchy—represented by its titular leader, Archbishop Prospero Penadas del Barrio—is generally pragmatic and apolitical but outspoken on human rights abuses attributable to both the government and the guerrillas. [redacted]

Chile

With the election of Salvador Allende in September 1970, Chile became the first major testing ground of direct collaboration between an activist church and a Marxist regime. The openness between official sectors of the Catholic Church and the Chilean Communist Party was a dramatic change from the early 1960s when the Church leadership condemned Marxism. According to historical accounts of the Chilean Catholic Church, the official Church remained neutral, but continued to support social reform within a constitutional framework. Meanwhile, many priests and layworkers became open advocates of Marxism through their writings and sermons. [redacted]

Today, open sources reveal the mainstream Church is an outspoken critic of President Pinochet's government. It maintains contact with leftist Chilean exiles, many of whom were assisted by the Church in fleeing the country since the coup in 1973. The Church also publicly operates a human rights office—the Vicariate of Solidarity—which monitors security services against the regime's opponents. The Vicariate has assigned lawyers to support victims' claims. [redacted]

Recently, the Church has become more actively involved in seeking to promote dialogue between the Pinochet regime and opposition groups regarding a transition to democracy. Last August, Cardinal Archbishop of Santiago Fresno brokered the so-called national accord—a multiparty agreement calling for political liberalization and negotiations ending Pinochet's rule. The Communist Party was excluded from the initiative because proponents of the accord wanted to avoid antagonizing the regime, but the Church's more activist role won respect from all sides. We believe Archbishop Fresno's activist stance has provided an outlet for social action within the ranks of the official Church rather than resorting to Popular Church activities. [redacted]

Brazil

The activism of Brazilian Catholic Church communities stems from years of military rule when religious groups were the only organizations allowed to meet. In our judgment, widespread social reform movements would not have been possible without the

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support and active engagement of members of the Catholic Church through the network of Brazilian bishops. A progressive Catholic hierarchy provided leaders for a nationwide movement of base communities, unions, and peasant federations that presented a growing challenge to the military dictatorship and helped open the way for the transition to civilian rule last year. Today, these groups provide the poor with an opportunity for participation in society through their work on concrete social and economic issues.

[redacted]

According to the US Embassy, Church laymen and clergy are expanding their ties to the small—but extreme—Sao Paulo-based Workers' Party and affiliated labor unions. The Workers' Pastorate, a little-known branch of the Sao Paulo diocese, cooperates closely with the most militant faction of the Workers' Party and the Central Workers' Union. Although a few clerics openly espouse Marxist dogma, most clergy in Brazil support the nonideological precepts of liberation theology.

[redacted]

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Hosting somewhere between 70,000 and 100,000 base communities, the Brazilian Church has grown increasingly liberal, left-of-center, and politically active with the advent of a civilian government. Although clerical influence is limited by the relatively small number of priests—about one for every 10,000 Brazilians—the tenets of liberation theology are widely accepted. According to open sources, the appeal of liberation theology and the base communities is strongest in the industrial suburbs and promises to grow in attraction as the unions strive to expand their political role. In this way, liberation theology has fostered the development of grassroots organizations that invite more local participation in the enacting of reforms.

[redacted]

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Recently, however, press reports reveal that the small, radical wing of the Church has increased its involvement in supporting land reform, labor agitation, and political organization. The leaders of this faction include Archbishop Arns of Sao Paulo and Archbishop Lorscheiter, President of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops. Both have defied Vatican pronouncements against their radical activities. Their public contact with Cuban and Nicaraguan officials underlies their advocacy for a radical change of the capitalist system to promote social reform.

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Appendix B**Selected Readings on
Liberation Theology****Major Sources on
the Movement**

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Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Ina and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973).

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Samuel Rayan, *The Holy Spirit: Heart of the Gospel and Human Hope* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1978).

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Hugo Latorre Cabal, *The Revolution of the Latin American Church*, trans. Frances K. Hendricks and Beatrice Berler (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma, 1978).

Enrique Dussel, *History and the Theology of Liberation*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976).

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the Movement**

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Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, *Liberation or Revolution?* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 1977).

James V. Schall, S. J., *Liberation Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985).

Arthur McGovern, S. J., *Marxism: An American Christian Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1980).

Dennis P. McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981).

Juan Gutierrez Gonzalez, *The New Libertarian Gospel: Pitfalls of the Theology of Liberation*, trans. Paul Burns (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977).

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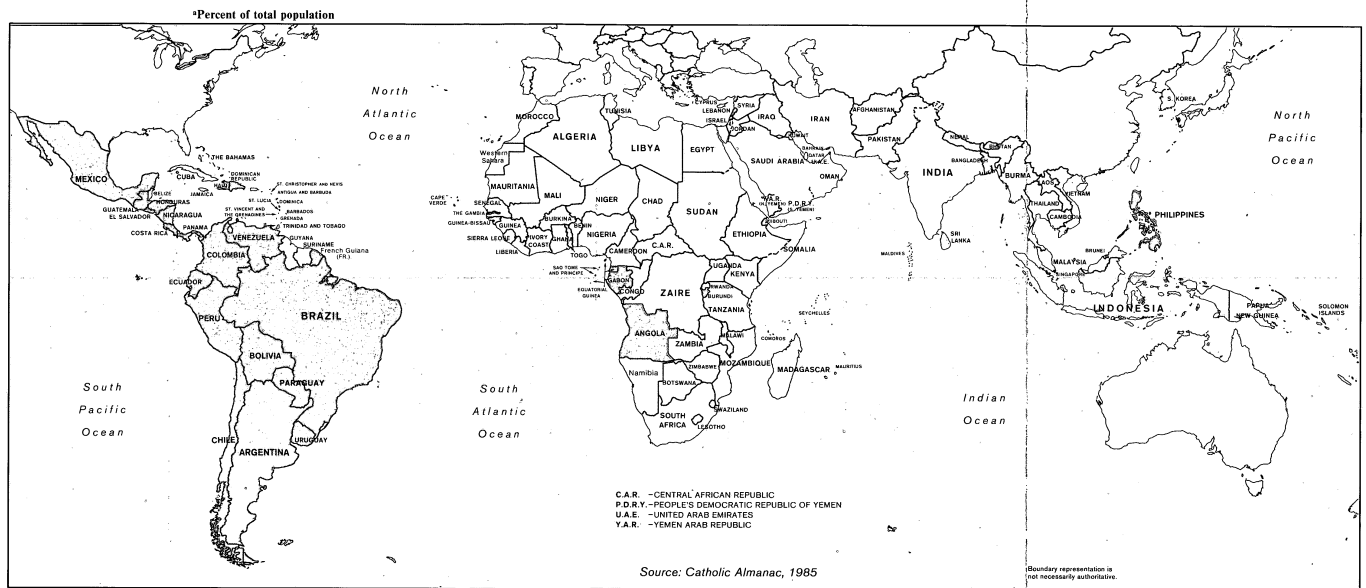
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Catholic Population in the Third World, 1985

50 and above* 10 to 50 Less than 10



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