



# Liberation theology and the voice of the indigenous other in Guatemala

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*The legacy of the liberation theology in Guatemala is complex. Although it mobilized progressive Catholic forces at times, it has not overcome reactionary and conservative church elements. Most importantly, it has not proven entirely capable of rising above elitism, nor has it moved beyond paternalism toward Maya culture.*

Key words: Guatemala, Maya, indigeneity, liberation theology, paternalism

La théologie de la libération et la voix de l'altérité autochtone au Guatemala

*La théologie de la libération a laissé au Guatemala un héritage complexe. Si en certaines occasions, elle a été en mesure de mobiliser les forces catholiques progressistes, en revanche, elle n'a pas réussi à surmonter le courant réactionnaire et conservateur de l'Église. Qui plus est, elle s'est avérée incapable de se détacher entièrement des élites ou de rompre avec une attitude paternaliste à l'égard de la culture maya.*

Mots clés : Guatemala, Maya, autochtonie, théologie de la libération, paternalisme

I read with interest the recent article published in your journal on ecclesial opposition to mining in Guatemala (Holden and Jacobson 2009). I applaud the authors' attempt to revisit the significance of contemporary manifestations of liberation theology in this country. I found their introductory summary of the genesis of the movement in Latin America both succinct and accurate.

However, when the authors turn to a discussion of the emergence and continuing significance of the progressive church in Guatemala, several problems emerge. Chief among these is the authors' nearly exclusive reliance on official church documents to reconstruct a narrative of the civil violence in Guatemala. As a consequence, what emerges is a partisan view of the Guatemalan Catholic Church's historical and actual social positions, which sweeps many historical ambiguities and nuances aside. This can be the only explanation for the endorsement of a statement such as that the Catholic Church has been Guatemala's 'moral conscience' (Steinberg and Taylor 2003, 454 in Holden and Jacobson 2009, 160).

Although in many cases, as the authors state, Catholic missionaries were indeed 'transformed by their relationships with peasants facing poverty on a daily basis' (Holden and Jacobson 2009, 151), one cannot forget that the roots of Catholic Action were extremely conservative in nature, indeed serving in many cases '[to] combat radical, Communist politics on a local level by providing an acceptable outlet for Indian frustration with social inequality' (Fischer 1996, 58). Indeed, for those of us who work in Guatemala, it is evident at nearly every turn that the progressive work of the Catholic Church remains deeply intertwined with these original conservative leanings (e.g., Shiffman and Del Valle 2006).

Similarly, the writers claim that the success of evangelical churches in Guatemala was due to military repression of the Catholic Church for its progressive tendencies, an assertion they make by relying on an official publication of the Archdiocese of Guatemala (Recovery of Historical Memory Project 1999). But the reasons for the success of evangelical and charismatic churches in Guatemala have been debated in dozens of

scholarly publications over the last 20 years (e.g., Martin 1990; Stoll 1991; Garrard-Burnett 1998; Gooren 2001) and only a few would make such a simplistic claim. Indeed, there is good evidence that Protestantism was already on the rise well before the surge in civil violence (Annis 1987). Additionally, military violence was generally directed more indiscriminately against the indigenous civic base than official Catholic sources would admit: 'Though radical Catholic catechists suffered...so equally did Protestants...' (Martin 1990, 254).

More to the point, there is a malaise in liberation theology in Guatemala, although many of those invested in the movement are quick to dismiss it. This malaise is historically deep-seated and tied to a crucial failure to become a theology *of* the people rather than simply a theology *about* the people. This failure is in part due to the fact that the church leadership has always been implicitly aligned with the upper classes of Guatemalan society, as they have routinely drawn membership from each others' ranks (e.g., the case studies of Guatemalan priests in Hale 2006).

As such, liberation theology in Guatemala has always been in danger of being reduced to a paternalistic discussion among cultural elites about a closely disciplined and circumscribed Maya Other. In her seminal analysis of interethnic relationships in northern Mexico, Martinez Novo (2006) demonstrates how paternalistic relationships are characterized by claims of 'protection for indigenous people', 'the imposition of a certain understanding of [indigenous] culture', and a fixation on the 'purity' of that culture (pp. 152-165). Church informants in the article under question reproduce these exact themes.

This view of the Other, rooted in paternalism, is a view deeply imprinted by a prejudicial neobiologism. Therefore it is no accident that Holden and Jacobson's informants lead them quite naturally to an invocation of the human diversity literature (e.g., Davis 2007), which analogises indigenous cultures as 'species of flora or fauna' (Holden and Jacobson 2009, 159). The diversity viewpoint tends to foster essentialism and exoticism. It leads to a certain nostalgia for groups of persons who bury their umbilical cords in the dirt—and not because the matter of their position as self-determining historical actors is

under serious consideration but, rather, because this nostalgia is a powerful tonic for the acedia of our own 'monochromatic world' view (Davis 2002, 61 in Holden and Jacobson 2009, 159).

At this point Trouillot's (2003) famous allegation about the Savage slot becomes relevant. The Savage is one who 'never faces the observer... the Savage is never an interlocutor, but evidence in an argument between two Western interlocutors about the possible futures of humankind' (p. 133). This rhetoric of the Savage slot that, through no fault of the authors of the paper in question, continues to this day to characterise liberation theology in Guatemala, recapitulates a time-honoured tradition in the Catholic theology of the Americas—a tradition that dates at least to the famous Valladolid debate between Sepúlveda and Las Casas (to follow Trouillot's line of thinking) and which is characterised by a move to decide about indigenous persons *in absentia*.

The parade of powerful church voices, which Holden and Jacobson reproduce, teaches us a great deal about the views of certain Church leaders. However, in the final analysis, these remain simply voices speaking behind the back of Trouillot's Savage. One has to strain to detect hints of the actual self-representation of the rural indigene, the 'collective will' that presumably gives liberation theology its power. Rather than learning what the rural indigene thinks about mining—or for that matter, liberation theology—we hear instead what the Church thinks they think or thinks they should think. This is an interpretive reduction, which we should no longer accept.

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