

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

Legacies of Liberation

The Progressive Catholic Church in Brazil at
the Start of a New Millennium

John Burdick



LEGACIES OF LIBERATION



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The Progressive Catholic Church in Brazil at the Start of a New
Millennium

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List of Abbreviations

AMZOL	Associação de Mulheres da Zona Este
APN	<i>agente de pastoral negro</i> (Black Pastoral agent)
CDD	Católicas pelo Direito de Decidir
CEB	<i>comunidade eclesial de base</i>
CFC	Catholics for a Free Choice
CFEMEA	Centro Feminista de Estudos e Assessoria
CIMI	Conselho Indigenista Misionária (Missionary Council for Indigenous Affairs)
CPT	Comissão Pastoral da Terra (Pastoral Land Commission)
CNBB	Conferência Nacional do Bispos do Brasil (National Brazilian Bishops' Conference)
INCRA	Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform)
MEB	Movimento de Educação de Base
MMTR	Movimento de Mulheres Trabalhadoras Rurais (Women Rural Workers' Movement)
MNU	Movimento Negro Unificado
MST	Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra (Landless Workers' Movement)
PMM	Pastoral de Mulheres Marginalizadas (Pastoral of Marginalized Women)
PT	Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party)
PVN	<i>pré-vestibular para negros</i> (forerunner of the PVNC)
PVNC	<i>pré-vestibular para negros e carentes</i> (college examination preparation course for blacks and the poor)



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Preface

The past 20 years have been hard on progressive Catholics in Latin America. Since the early 1980s, progressive clergy, pastoral activists and liberation theologians across the continent have found it necessary to shift from talking about the growing influence, if not immanent triumph, of the progressive Catholic 'model', and towards public acknowledgement that the model is in crisis. I, for one, could read no writing on the wall in 1983, when Pope John Paul II visited Nicaragua. I can vividly recall watching on television as the pontiff moved along the reception line of Sandinista leaders, greeting each one, until he reached Ernesto Cardenal, the ordained priest who served in the government as minister of culture. Cardenal knelt, but there was no mistaking the pope's reprimanding finger: an ordained priest was not supposed to serve as a minister of state. I watched this drama without alarm, confident that Cardenal would remain in his post, inspired by a vision that, I believed, could never be contained by papal authority. Indeed, for me, Cardenal was living proof that reading the Bible as a manifesto for social justice had cracked the shell of the old Church; here was a Church that would no longer take 'no' for an answer, would grow irresistibly larger and stronger, and would continue in its mission to give voice to the numberless masses. When, the following year, the pope called the Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff to Rome to silence him, my impression became even more solid that the institutional Church was feeling threatened to its very core. The Church, I was sure, could never silence all the voices for change. In my view – which, it turns out, was also the view of many progressive Catholics at the time – the effort to stifle Boff was the last gasp of a decaying ecclesiastical model that would soon be overrun by a million voices clamouring for a church of small, self-sufficient, politically conscious Christian communities.

As it turned out, the attack on Boff, far from being the defensive manoeuvre of a cornered Church, was the Church's first major offensive in a war that would eventually reveal its extraordinary staying power and the liberationists' vulnerability. It was a war that the traditional Church would, in the view of many, dominate and win. At first, many observers were reluctant to recognize this. But as the Vatican alternated between a policy of frontally attacking liberation theology and seeking to coopt it, what eventually came to light was the fragility of the progressive Church's own social base. By the late 1980s utopian hope had turned to resignation, or worse. These feelings were deepened by the crisis of socialism in 1989 and most searingly by the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990.

Over the course of the following years, an increasing number of progressive commentators admitted that the liberationist Church might not triumph after all. What was happening? Progressive bishops in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America were rapidly being replaced by conservative ones. Socialist ideals were everywhere on the defensive. And Ernesto Cardenal had been voted out of power. While one should not make the mistake of reducing the political significance of liberation theology to its occupancy of the halls of state, the fact that Cardenal no longer walked those halls became an apt symbol of the passing of an era. Liberation theology, if not yet dead, was mortally wounded. The newspapers and 'talking heads' rubbed salt into the wound. In the early 1990s, as history 'came to an end', it was difficult to escape declarations that liberation theology was but a shard of the great dream of the Left, shattered by the onrushing train of neo-liberal, post-Marxist modernity. By the 1990s most observers were saying that too much rationalism, and too many high-flying expectations, had undone both the theology and its practice, and helped hasten both its decline and the growth of those other less-than-rational movements, Pentecostalism and the Catholic charismatic renewal. Reflecting this overall mood, in 1993 I published *Looking for God in Brazil*, which gave voice to the view that the days of the progressive Catholic project were numbered.

Yet the very year that book was published I was already beginning to sense that despite the People's Church's retreat, the ideas and dreams articulated by liberationists seemed to have spilled over into a variety of powerful social processes that were changing the face of Brazil. Late in 1993 I had a memorable, though brief, conversation with an activist in the MST, the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra, the Landless Workers' Movement. I had asked him to tell me what the aims of the movement were. His reply astonished me. 'Our goal is to live on the land the way God wanted us to, it is to return to the land He promised us.' My astonishment came from something almost intangible: a certain lilt of voice, a certain confident, upturned chin as these words were spoken. I had seen and heard that confidence for years in the Christian base communities of the Catholic Church. Then, in 1994, Chiapas exploded. At first, like many others I understood the Zapatistas to be a secular, radical movement. Yet the more I learned, the more the deep influence of liberation theology upon Zapatista leadership and base became apparent. Among the MST and the Zapatistas, perhaps two of the most significant social movements in Latin America in the early 1990s, liberation theology had left an unmistakable imprint. Could it be, I wondered at the end of 1994, that this theology was not, after all, irrelevant to the post-1989 world?

By the mid- to late 1990s, to this question was added my growing awareness that, despite the overall decline in the number of politically active *comunidades eclesiais de base* (CEBs),¹ the national meetings of CEBs were remarkably well attended and vibrant. In 1997 I followed with

great interest the national meeting of CEBs in São Luiz de Maranhão, where almost 5000 delegates from all around the country sang, danced, and communed joyfully together for over four days, all the while describing their work and dreams as the slow, arduous struggle for the promised land. If the CEBs were dying, somehow the news had not reached these delegates.

By 1998 I had become convinced that the story of the liberationists' survival into the post-1989 world needed to be told. While completing another project, I continued to place items into a 'New Liberationism' file. The file grew thicker as cases accumulated of old liberationist projects that refused to die, of others that experimented with new approaches, and of others that were regaining ground once lost. From consciousness-raising around Afro-Brazilian rights, to facing the challenges of feminism, to articulating and sustaining a revolutionary reading of Exodus that to this day motivates and inspires landless workers throughout the country, liberationist Catholicism appeared increasingly rich with dynamism and hope for the future. History had not yet quite ended for the liberationist Church.

In writing this book I have accrued many personal debts. I met César Soeiro at the national CEBs' meeting in 2000, and have in subsequent years imposed more than once on his and his family's hospitality, as I have come to know the world of liberationist Catholics in Maranhão. For this I am grateful to both César and his wife Lusinete. Also in Maranhão, I was the beneficiary of the support and insight of Padre Evandro, Padre Waldemar, Padre Flávio, and the team at Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT), including Paulo and Idomar. In Pôrto Alegre, Maurilio Galdinho and Charmain Levy were exceptional hosts, helping me to navigate the often turbulent political waters of the place. Also in Pôrto Alegre, I was honoured to receive guidance from Frei Wilson Dallagnol, Frei Orestes, and Zander Navarro. In Rio Grande do Sul, in connection with the MST, I was pleased by the welcome I received from Nina and the CPT team. In Rio de Janeiro, I have, over the years, benefited from the support and hospitality of Frei David Raimundo dos Santos and his team. Also in Rio, over the years of researching this book I have continued to benefit from the friendship (and not infrequent criticism) of colleagues including Peter Fry, Yvonne Maggie, Márcia Contins, Olivia da Cunha, Regina Novaes, Livio Sansone and Cecilia Mariz. Andréa Damaeceno was especially helpful to me in talking through a variety of issues pertaining to this book's central themes. In the United States, my thinking about the Church and social movements has continued to be sharpened by conversations with Randy Stoecker, Kenneth Serbin, Marc Edelman, Margaret Crahan, Carol Ann Drogus, Dave Dixon, and Heidi Swarts. My mother, Dolores Burdick, showed once again that she is the world's best editor, and my father, Harvey Burdick, showed once again that he is the world's best curmudgeon. Whatever there is of value in this book derives much of its merit from my association with these people. The guilt for all that is blameworthy in it is mine alone.

A special expression of thanks goes to my wife, Judy, who has been far more patient with me than the academic life deserves. My two children, Benjamin and Molly, are, in the most important sense, the reason I write at all. To them and to their mother I owe everything.

Note

- 1 The *comunidades eclesiais de base* (CEBs) are Catholic congregations in which a progressive reading of the Bible is actively pursued and implemented.



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Introduction

Looking for Legacies

The Emergence of a Liberationist Catholicism

If, in the early years of the twentieth century, an incautious soothsayer had hazarded the prediction that Brazil's Catholic Church, for more than four centuries a bastion of authoritarianism, would soon become one of the hemisphere's most vigorous defenders of progressive ideals, he would no doubt have been dismissed as a lunatic.¹ As late as the 1940s, bishops and clergy in Brazil's rural areas remained staunch allies of large landholders; in the cities they took the side of order against the rabble; and everywhere they stood arm-in-arm with state power. Perhaps no moment better epitomizes the Brazilian Church before mid-century than the day in 1931 when Rio de Janeiro's Cardinal Leme looked down upon the *cidade maravilhosa* from the towering peak of Corcovado, as he and the recently instated dictator Getúlio Vargas together inaugurated the stupendously large statue of Christ the Redeemer that, to this day, stands guard, arms outstretched, over a glistening white and brown sea of skyscrapers and shanty towns.²

And yet the soothsayer would have been right. Within a generation the arch-conservatism typified by Leme's visit to Corcovado would be challenged to its very roots, from within the Church itself. Beginning in the late 1940s, a variety of powerful forces would beget a movement of young, idealistic clergy and laity committed to a politically progressive vision of the Gospel.³

After the Second World War Brazil underwent rapid urbanization, as the rulers of state strove to develop heavy industry in urban areas and mechanize production in rural ones.⁴ At the same time, new post-war ideals of justice, liberty and basic rights for all were flowing into Brazil's courts, press and political meeting halls. A charismatic president, Juscelino Kubitchek, raised Brazilians' hopes that their needs would soon be met through rapid economic development.⁵ By the end of the 1950s, when Kubitchek promised '50 years of progress in 5', a youthful generation of Brazilians were ready to believe him.⁶

Yet just as they were being spoken, such promises were already beginning to sound hollow to the millions pushed off their land and towards overcrowded cities where jobs were scarce and the infrastructure non-existent.⁷ High hopes stimulated by populist politicians gave way to widespread frustration as the dream of progress foundered on the hard reality of landlessness, unemployment and urban squalor. New ideologies

tapped into growing resentment and longing. Rural workers in the north-east rallied to the call of the Peasant Leagues; parties of the Left found a growing number of adherents; and evangelical Christianity swept through urban shanties and rural hamlets.⁸ The Catholic Church responded to these pressures in a number of ways, the most pertinent to our interest being to create a more active clerical presence among the poor.⁹ In the north-east, the bishops initiated literacy campaigns and rural Catholic unions; elsewhere they created Catholic Action groups; everywhere they strove to reach out to poor, unattended Catholics.¹⁰ For rounds of duty among the poor the Church found recruits among the growing number of regular priests arriving from Europe, armed with the 'see-judge-act' method of Joseph Cardijn, in which Christians combined engagement in the world with judgement illuminated by the Christian ideal of justice.¹¹ The Church also found recruits among young Brazilians inspired by Catholic social doctrine.¹² While many bishops endorsed the doctrine as a way of drawing the poor away from the temptations of socialism,¹³ in the eyes of young pastoral agents the important thing was that their Church was finally taking to heart the lives of the downtrodden.

By the early 1960s a growing number of regular clergy, pastoral agents and clergy-in-training were working in Brazil's poor neighbourhoods and rural areas, where they could bring the Word to what they saw as the wretched of the earth. Perhaps not surprisingly, living closely with the poor and witnessing their daily humiliations had a radicalizing effect on this generation of religious. In the late 1990s a Franciscan monk who had worked in the north-east recounted the following memory to me:

I was there in the community, and the place was really miserable. There was no clean running water, and no sewage, just the stuff running open in the street. And in a situation like that, what difference does charity make? You can give some clean water to a family, but so what? There was only one way to deal with that – to put pressure on the authorities to do what they were supposed to do. So seeing this really impressed on me the need for action together, not just individual charity.

By the time of this memory, the Church had begun to experiment with another solution to the lack of an institutional Catholic presence: to train laypeople to perform sacraments, lead Bible readings and administer the day-to-day details of the Church. The early efforts took root in Rio de Janeiro during the late 1950s and in Natal at the start of the 1960s.¹⁴ Within a few years, laypeople across the country had been formed into community-level councils to manage the affairs of their local churches. These were Latin America's first *comunidades eclesiais de base* or Christian base communities.¹⁵ In addition, in the north-east, the energetic bishop, Dom Helder Camara, helped conceptualize the Movimento de Educação de Base (MEB), a programme of radio literacy campaigns that sought to strengthen

progressive consciousness among the rural poor. The MEB eventually in the early 1960s had at its head an educator named Paulo Freire, who used a method rooted in confidence that the poor could be moved from a fatalist to a radical-agentive consciousness. Central to the method was 'reflecting on everyday life' through guided discussion of key words,¹⁶ a method soon transferred to base communities.¹⁷ All these activities received a major boost from the council of bishops assembled in Rome from 1962 to 1965. In *Gaudium et spes*, the Council's final document, the pope urged his Church to move 'forward together with humanity and experience the same earthly lot which the world does'.¹⁸ Clergy busy at the grassroots took these words as a vindication of their work.

Despite the Brazilian military regime's efforts after 1964 to reduce progressive influence within the Church,¹⁹ by the end of the decade liberationist Catholicism was thriving. Catholic progressives had received a shot of legitimacy from the Latin American bishops' conference in 1968, in Medellín, Colombia.²⁰ In a final document that was to prove among the most progressive ever produced by an official Catholic body, the bishops of Latin America apologized for centuries of complicity with the ruling class²¹ and called on Catholics to confront the poverty and 'institutionalized violence' of the continent by 'creat[ing] and develop[ing] their own grassroots organizations for the redress and consolidation of their rights and the search for true justice'.²² In 1969 a series of military assassinations of clergy provoked moderate and conservative bishops to join in a unified front with their progressive colleagues.²³ By 1970 Brazil's national bishops' conference was making public statements against state repression; by 1973 it was engaged in a national campaign for human rights; and by 1975, after the murder of journalist Vladimir Herzog, the bishops rallied to the cause of return to civilian rule.²⁴

The decade from the early 1970s to the early 1980s would, in retrospect, come to be regarded as a Golden Age of the liberationist Church.²⁵ It was during this decade that progressive Catholics threw themselves into mobilizing base communities for social and political activism, catalysing thousands of grassroots social movement groups,²⁶ creating national institutions, seating their leaders in publishing houses and seminaries, and training a generation in the 'see-judge-act' method.²⁷ Never before nor since have progressive Catholics in Brazil exercised so much tangible, and visible, institutional influence.²⁸

It was also a period that saw the efflorescence of original and eloquent progressive theological writing.²⁹ Catholic liberationists insisted that reflection upon God must begin with the question: how does God wish humanity to act in relation to misery and oppression?³⁰ Their answer: God expects His children to join forces, oppose social evil, and bring about a world of social equality and justice. 'To work for a just world', wrote Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, 'where there is no servitude, oppression, and alienation is to work for the advent of the Messiah.'³¹