

**Liberation Theology and the Other(s):
Contextualizing Catholic Activism in 20th
Century Latin America**

Veranstalter: University of Bern

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On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Latin American Bishop's Conference in Medellín, the University of Bern hosted a conference to discuss new approaches to the history of progressive Catholicism in Latin America during the second half of the past century. CHRISTIAN BÜSCHGES (Bern) introduced the theme of the conference by discussing the historical processes that led to a new orientation of the Catholic hierarchies in Latin America in the late 1960s. Among others, he referred to the long tradition of Christian social doctrine and Catholic Action movements, but also contemporary developments like the transnational circulation of missionaries (*Fidei Donum*) and the Cold War. Historical research on liberation theology, he outlined, had thus far been limited to theological exegesis as well as a focus on the work of some of its most prominent representatives. In line with these observations, the conference aimed at uniting historians and scholars from related disciplines to discuss and critically examine the social history of progressive Catholicism in a variety of geographical and temporal contexts.

The first panel sought to critically examine pastoral discourses and actions. ALINE HELG (Geneva) opened the conference with her presentation on the work of bishop Gerardo Valencia Cano in Buenaventura (Colombia). In her paper she discussed his addresses to his largely Afro-colombian parishioners through radio, a source that reveals how his progressive orientation from 1968 up until his death in 1972 remained confuse and incoherent notwithstanding his commitment to the empowerment of marginalized black communities along the Pacific Coast. In the following presentation DAVID YEE (Stony Brook University) addressed a different pastoral experience, discussing the case of Jesuit students from the „Universidad Iberoamericana“ who

decided to move to a shantytown to help urban dwellers on the outskirts of Mexico City. Living among a highly marginalized and often illiterate population, the students engaged in a reflection about their own class consciousness and clerical background while establishing a so-called ‘popular university’ to be of service to the inhabitants of the yet to be formalized neighborhoods. Following discussion of Afro-Colombian and marginalized urban spaces, ROLANDO IBERICO RUIZ (PUCP Lima) discussed the experience of a Pastoral Institute in Cuzco in its attempt to develop a pastoral practice adapted to the population and beliefs of the Southern Andes of Peru. These attempts were not only necessary due to the presence of many foreign missionaries, Iberico Ruiz argued, but also responded to an emerging debate about the ‘culture of Catholicism’ that questioned the universality of faith practice.

The second panel aimed to examine how the Church performed its mission in the sphere of education and development. CHRISTIAN BÜSCHGES (Bern) presented his research on the case of the „Instituto de Investigación Cultural para la Educación del Pueblo“, a center for popular education of rural communities in the southern Bolivian Altiplano. In particular, he analyzed the edited education material and its linkages to the promotion and recovery of Quechua and Aymara cultural values. Thereafter, AMÉRICO FREIRE (Fundación Getulio Vargas) discussed his longstanding research on a group of Brazilian theologians, „El Grupo Emaús“, and their role as a religious vanguard in addressing social, political and ecclesiastical reform in Brazil. After a short excursion to the lusophone world, ANDREA MÜLLER (Bern) brought the focus back to the Andes with her discussion of entanglements between development actors and the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Riobamba, Ecuador. In her paper, she argued that the practice of development actors – both religious and lay personnel – continued the work launched by the Andean Mission in the 1950s with regards to the education of local community leaders – an effort intensified under the bishop Leonidas Proaño in the 1970s and 1980s. In the final presentation

of the first day, JUAN MIGUEL ESPINOZA PORTOCARRERO (PUCP Lima) discussed a part of a larger research project on the social Apostolate of the Jesuits in Peru. Focusing on a neighborhood of Lima created in the late 1940s, „El Augustino“, Espinoza Portocarrero examined the insertion practices of mostly foreign-born Jesuits as well as their political action in favor of a formal recognition of the settlements.

The third panel discussed different forms of social activism in- and outside of the Catholic Church, starting with the presentation of BETSY KONEFAL (College of William and Mary, Williamsburg). Her research analyzes the work of a group of Maryknoll nuns and university students in Guatemala during the 1960s and 1970s, focusing on their connections with the Rebel Armed Forces FAR and the ways they negotiated their role within the context of structural violence and the so-called Christian Revolution. By drawing attention to the gender gap within research on liberation theology, BRAD H. WRIGHT (Middle Tennessee State University) presented a paper on Christian base communities in the *colonia popular* Santa Cecilia, in Guadalajara (Mexico). He emphasized in his talk that women's participation in Catholic activism is broadly neglected in archival sources and argued in favor of the method of oral history. LORENA GARCIA MOURELLE (Universidad de la República, Uruguay) discussed processes of religious and political radicalization among catholic students in Uruguay – a lay state – between 1968 and 1973. Her findings reveal that despite a radical model of laity that dealt with religion as a private affair, events like the Medellin conference fostered a new linkage between faith and politics. In the last presentation of this panel, NOAH OEHRI (Bern) showed how a diocesan radio station in Puno (Peru) was involved in peasant activism and violent conflict during the 1980s. Through the analysis of the „voices of the voiceless“, he explored the creation of a new mediatized space for dialogue and, by doing so, illustrated how religious radio can provide a discursive arena for the circulation of counter narratives.

The closing session of the conference aimed to debate the limits of liberation and indige-

nous theologies. ANDREW ORTA (Illinois), drawing upon three decades of ethnographic field research with Aymaran communities of the Bolivian highlands, presented a paper that stressed the concept of inculturation when examining the tensions and convergences of late twentieth century evangelization with neoliberal politics. Subsequently, with a regional focus on Mexico, EBEN LEVEY (Maryland) discussed the Catholic seminary SERESURE and its liberationist *pastoral indígena*. He contextualized the history of this institution by looking beyond charismatic figures of liberation theology like the bishop of Chiapas, Samuel Ruiz García. The last speaker of the conference, JOSEF ESTERMANN (Lucerne), elaborated on the hermeneutical turn within liberation theology towards an indigenous theology in the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, he showed how the incidence of the *Teología India* found an echo in constitutional amendments implemented by leftist governments in countries like Bolivia or Ecuador.

Throughout the conference, constructive and vivid debates among the participants gave rise to more general observations and questions that research on progressive Catholicism in Latin America must address. The conference members agreed on the necessity of investigations that look at entanglements of ideas and actors in concrete, local contexts. In addition, it has been stressed repeatedly that the periodization, as well as the continuities and ruptures of liberation theology should be analyzed beyond major ecclesiastical events like the Second Vatican Council or the Latin American Bishop's Conference in Medellin. Other issues that shaped the debate and were considered relevant for further research were the definition of the subject of evangelization by including aspects of class, ethnicity and gender, forms and media of pastoral work, as well as the connections between liberation theology and social movements.

Conference overview:

Panel I: 'Practice what you preach': Interrogating Pastoral Discourse and Action, Chair: Christiane Berth, University of Bern

Aline Helg (University of Geneva): Broadcasting Liberation Theology? Bishop Gerardo Valencia Cano's Discourse to Afro-

Colombians in Buenaventura

David Yee (Stony Brook University): Serve the People: Liberation Theology in a Mexican Shantytown

Rolando Iberico Ruiz (PUCP Lima): El Instituto de Pastoral Andina (IPA) y el descubrimiento del Otro: Educación y política de liberación (1968-1979)

Panel II: Beyond Modernization? The Church Between Popular Education and Development, Chair: Corinne Pernet, University of Geneva

Christian Büschges (University of Bern): Liberation Theology and the (Re-)construction of Rural Andean Culture. The „Instituto de Investigación Cultural para Educación del Pueblo“ (INDICEP) in Oruro (1960s-1970s)

Américo Freire (Fundación Getulio Vargas): Grupo Emaús y la teología de la liberación en Brasil: Notas de investigación

Andrea Müller (University of Bern): Imaginarios y espacios en competición: la misión liberadora y la cooperación internacional al desarrollo en Ecuador (1960s-1980s)

Juan Miguel Espinoza Portocarrero (PUCP Lima): Evangelización liberadora, clasismo y educación popular en la iglesia peruana del posconcilio: el caso de la Compañía de Jesús en la periferia urbana de Lima (1968-1990)

Panel III: Priests and Politics: Social Activism In- and Outside of the Catholic Church, Chair: Stella Krepp, University of Bern

Betsy Konefal (College of William and Mary): Progressive Catholicism and the Seeds of Rebellion in Guatemala

Brad H. Wright (Middle Tennessee State University): The Counternarratives of Doña Lucha: Base Communities, Popular Education, and Social and Political Change in Urban Mexico, 1969-1985

Lorena Garcia Mourelle (Universidad de la República, Uruguay): Movimiento estudiantil, catolicismo e izquierdas en Uruguay, 1968-1973: Una perspectiva regional

Noah Oehri (University of Bern): Mobilization of Faith in Times of Conflict: The Voices

and Images of Peace Activism in Puno

Panel IV: Debating the Limits of Liberation and Indigenous Theologies, Chair: Victor Strazzeri, University of Bern

Andrew Orta (University of Illinois): Conversions and Convergences: Inculturation and Neoliberalism in Turn of the 21st Century Bolivia

Eben Levey (University of Maryland): Making Liberation Theology Indigenous: The „Seminario Regional del Sureste“ (SERESURE) and Indigenous Mexico, 1969-1990

Josef Estermann (University of Lucerne): Teologías indígenas en Abya Yala: Sus repercusiones en políticas progresistas en América Latina

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