PREFACE

A work of this nature demands some kind of explanation and contextualisation. It can best be described as a series of examples of serendipity, the chance discovery of important things whilst looking for something else entirely. The proximate cause I describe in the introduction,¹ but there are a number of less proximate events which are no less important.

The first of these was going to Brazil in 1991 to study theology. At the time, I knew one Brazilian, a few more words of Portuguese, and that the city where I was going to live, Belo Horizonte, was the scene of England’s defeat by the USA in the 1950 World Cup. Over the four years I spent in Brazil I came to know a lot more. I was welcomed and befriended by many Brazilians, my Portuguese became considerably better, and Brazil won the World Cup!

Perhaps most importantly for this work, for most of my time in Belo Horizonte apart from studying I was also helping in a church community (now a parish) on the outskirts of the city. On the night before I left Brazil to return to England, there was a service of sending in the church, and I was sent by the members of the community as a missionary to Europe. These are the others who have most inspired me and in whom time and again I met and meet Christ. One of the most important motivations for me in writing what follows has been to acknowledge them in their otherness and to respond to the command which I received from them.

On my return to London, with a small group of Brazilians, we started a Brazilian Roman Catholic Chaplaincy, another place of encounter with people who continued to force me to think and reflect on Brazil and the theology I had studied there. These people, too, have been others who have helped me in the writing of this work.

So, though this work is in many ways very theoretical, its roots are not, and in its writing many faces have been before me, many conversations and shared joys and sorrows. I say this not as an excuse or as an attempt to deflect criticism, but because it is a reality at the heart of all that is best in liberation theology. The best which liberation theology has to offer, and which I have tried to use in this work, springs not from a theory but from a living encounter. It is precisely the way this encounter and the theory interact that I seek to investigate critically in this study.

One of the results of the encounter between theory and praxis which drives liberation theology’s method as I outline it in this study is that it is very hard to distinguish between the different stimuli, intellectual, personal, social and so on. Friendship and respect are often as important as logical precision in determining whether or not an argument seems to hold water.

¹ See p.1.f below.
Of course, this does not mean that rationality is abandoned, or that criticism cannot be levelled at one’s friends. But it does mean that, as the gospel of Matthew insists, the fruits of the tree tell us something about the kind of tree it is.\textsuperscript{2}

So it is that I want to record my thanks to the people whose good fruits I have been privileged to share. I realised as I came towards the end of the thesis that in one way or other I have quoted nearly all those who taught me at what is now the Jesuit Faculty in Belo Horizonte. It is a small sign of the inspiration and encouragement which they gave me during my studies and since. Particular thanks to Pe. Libanio SJ, who continues to be a wonderful inspiration. I am also very grateful to the Superior, Pe. Claudio Paul SJ, and the Jesuit Community in the Faculty who were such warm hosts to us during our stay in Belo Horizonte in July and August 2008.

Although this work is not a detailed study of one person, the theologian I have most concentrated on is Frei Clodovis Boff OSM. Meeting people one spends so much time with in books can be a rather difficult experience. However, this was not the case with Frei Clodovis, and I want to acknowledge my thanks to him for agreeing to meet with my wife and me and for his time and consideration. It was a very important occasion and led to an even greater respect for him and his work.

My study in Brazil in the first place was when I was a member of the British Province of the Society of Jesus. This work is also possible because of them and because of the encounter with Jesuits from around the world. This is a good space to record my affection and gratitude for the Society of Jesus. The trip in July and August 2008 was made possible by the generosity of the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague where I am privileged to work. I want to record here my deepest thanks to the Rector, the Revd. Dr. Keith Jones and to all my colleagues for their support, friendship and interest. I am also very grateful for the sabbatical which enabled me to complete this work. The fact that I was to spend it in Amsterdam, where, almost four hundred years ago as I write, the first gathering of Baptist believers took place, is an added joy.

I am heavily indebted to my two promotors, Professor Dr. Martien Brinkman and Prof. Dr Hans de Wit. At least from my side, it has been a real joy to work with them and learn from them. I know this work would have been much the poorer without their input, and much the richer if I had been able to incorporate all their insights. The comments from my readers have been thought-provoking and I have tried to incorporate some of them at least in this printed version of the text. I thank them for their kind attention to my work.

Ending up at the Free University of Amsterdam was another entirely serendipitous event, and for that reason perhaps all the more enjoyable. I

\textsuperscript{2} Matthew 7:16-20
am also extremely grateful to Prof. Dr Eddy van der Borght, who organised for my wife to come to teach a course in the Free University, which enabled us to live in Amsterdam for three months. It was a great joy for us to live and work in the city for this time and we are indebted to the Theology Faculty of the Free University of Amsterdam for making this stay possible and for welcoming us so warmly.

There are many others who deserve thanks, but I will restrict myself to a few names. Dr. Peter Moree first suggested to me that I should consider studying in the Netherlands, and I am very happy that he did. Whilst we were in Brazil we stayed with a good friend, Elaine, who was a member of the youth group when I worked in the community on the outskirts of Belo Horizonte. We enjoyed her hospitality and her company very much. We are also grateful to Maria Clara Bingemer and her husband for their kindness and hospitality during our time in Rio de Janeiro. I am also grateful to Elza Kuyk for translating the summary into Dutch for me.

On the grounds that the best should be saved for last, I want finally to acknowledge my thanks to my wife, Doc. Dr Ivana Noble (though that is not usually what I call her!). Long before we ever dreamed we would one day be married, Ivana encouraged me to come to Prague to teach on liberation theology and insisted that I continue to study. Since I began on this work, she has been a constant source of help and an excellent conversation partner. Much to both our amusement, I found that I was coming closer and closer to some of the issues which she herself had covered in her doctorate. She has read every word of this study, several times, and I truly can say that the work would have been much worse without her constructive criticism. Of all the others who have helped produce this work, she has been the most commanding, and the one to whom I have most happily tried to respond. I am not sure that a work of this nature can be offered as a token of love and gratitude to one’s wife, but on the other hand, she is also a theologian, so at least I can try! Ivano, mám Tě moc rád a děkuju za všechno.
INTRODUCTION

Í say móre: the just man justices;
Kéeps gráce: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is—
Chríst—for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.¹

These lines, written by the nineteenth-century British Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins,² stress the importance of what today we might call praxis – “the just man justices”, and in keeping grace, “that keeps all his goings graces”. For Hopkins life is discovered and revealed not in the syllogisms and logic of the Scholastic manuals, but in the joyful uniqueness of each individual coming to be that which it was called to be. And yet this individuality is not fragmentary, for what unites each is its loveliness to God, who sees in each the presence of the Son.

At heart, my study is about the recognition of the truth that Hopkins captures so beautifully in the lines quoted above. I ask how liberation theologians can allow the poor to be iconic, to be encountered as Christ at play “in ten thousand places”, to address and challenge us as grace, as gift from the Father through the Son in the dynamism of the Spirit. Or, in terms of my title, how can the window to God be kept open, how can the poor be allowed to remain always other?

The basic question which I address can be stated very briefly:

What, if anything, in the methodology of liberation theology, especially as developed and spelt out by Clodovis Boff, enables the poor to remain other and hence iconic?

The Reasons for Writing This Work

Fittingly for a theology which has always stressed the importance of praxis, the seeds of the topic of my research are a practical frustration which has led to a theoretical questioning. The practical frustration was not with liberation theologians themselves. There is, in general, a care and a caution

² Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), a convert to Catholicism who then joined the Society of Jesus, is one of the most original poets in the English language. Although educated in Scholastic theology, he discovered and was deeply influenced by Scotist theology, especially the idea of haecceitas. He worked for a few years as a parish priest in the north of England, among the poor, and, in common with many artists in the late nineteenth century, found some attraction in what he understood as the basic tenets of Communism. He later taught Classics in Dublin, where he died. His poems were not published until 1918.
in their work which does not make too many grandiose claims. It is no
doubt possible to find exceptions, at least on the level of individual
sentences or paragraphs.\footnote{It is invidious to give examples. However, it may be helpful to give some idea of what I mean, so here is
a quotation from an article by Ronaldo Munoz, “The Function of the Poor in the Church”, in Norbert
Greinacher and Alois Müller (eds.), The Poor and the Church, New York, Crossroad, 1977 (= Concilium
104), pp.80-88, here p.81 “…the poor, formed into a base or local Church, can and in fact do fulfil a
function of vital importance in relation to the non-poor of that local church and the non-poor Churches of
the world: that of prophetic denunciation of materialist possessiveness, of the injustices and divisions that
today tear humanity apart. More important still, perhaps, they have a function of evangelical
communication – proclaiming a renewed experience of Christian brotherhood and active commitment in a
history of liberation inspired by hope in the Kingdom of God.” A charitable interpretation would find
nothing too much to disagree with in this, but one might ask, not unreasonably, whether the poor really
exist simply to fulfil a function for the rest of the “non-poor” church. Other examples from the 1970s
might be Hugo Assmann, “Political Commitment in the Context of the Class Struggle”, in Alois Müller
and Norbert Greinacher (eds.), Political Commitment and Christian Community, New York, Herder and
Approach”, in Claude Geffré and Gustavo Gutiérrez (eds.), The Mystical and Political Dimension of the
Christian Faith, New York, Herder and Herder, 1974 (= Concilium 96), pp.34-56, and see especially
pp.40ff. It is only fair to point out that the positions of these authors, and in particular Assmann, have
changed in the intervening period.\footnote{See, for example, Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Liberation Praxis and Christian Faith”, in Rosino Gibellini (ed.),
committed to liberation are subjected to all sorts of pressure, and they are not exempt from the impact of
romanticism, emotional tension and ambiguous doctrinal bases”. Gutiérrez’s essay is from 1973.}
But what was frustrating was listening to or reading those engaged in
pastoral activity trying to justify any sort of claim simply by loudly
inserting and asserting reference to the “poor”. One notorious example of
this, perhaps, is in the Pastoral Edition of the Bible\footnote{Bíblia Sagrada, Edição Pastoral, São Paulo, Paulinas, 1990}, published in Brazil in
1990. The aim of this translation was to produce a version which would be
accessible to the ordinary people, and the notes which accompanied it were
intended to present a liberationist reading of the Scriptures. The aims were
admirable enough, but the result was more problematic, a reductionist
(mis)reading of the text to prove a point.\footnote{The note on the feeding of the 5000 in John 6:1-15 might serve as a minor example. “Jesus proposes the
mission for his community: to be a sign of God’s generous love, ensuring for all the possibility of
subsistence and dignity. The security of subsistence is not in the much which the few possess but in the
little of each one which is shared among all. The guarantee of dignity is not found in the power of a leader
who commands but in the service of each one who organises the community for the good of all” (p.1361).
This may be true, but it would be hard to justify as a natural reading of the Johannine narrative, where the
“signs” of Jesus are precisely signs of Jesus, revealing who he is. As the gospel text goes on to make
clear, Jesus is the bread of life, and the emphasis is on him, not on what the boy has to offer. The problem
is one of reductionism.}
agents whose approach is based on advocacy of the poor so often give up or become disenchanted. The failure of the reality, always far more complex, to live up to the ideals (or as I will argue later on, idols) led often to paralysis. People living in situations of poverty were no more willing to be straitjacketed by liberationist perspectives than by those of the dominant forms of oppression. To respond with at best a Marxist critique of the alienation of the poor and their ideologisation by the infrastructure was and is not good enough, because it denies any independent power of thought to those who, it was insisted, God wanted to set free in a particular way.

I wish to affirm with liberation theology the importance of listening to, and theologising out of, the reality of the poor. However, it did not seem to me that the way in which liberation theology was assumed and received by various pastoral agents quite succeeded in allowing the poor to be other. At best, the poor were a stick with which to beat the back of society or the hierarchical church. It was only years later, reading a review of a book that dealt, among others, with Jean-Luc Marion, that it occurred to me that this problem could usefully be dealt with by addressing it in terms of conceptual iconicity and idolatry.

The poor have been described as a “sacrament of God” in liberation theology, and sacraments, in the traditional Roman Catholic understanding of the term, are iconic, providing a means of privileged encounter with God. My reading of Clodovis Boff suggested to me that liberation theology was assumed and received by various pastoral agents quite succeeded in allowing the poor to be other. At best, the poor were a stick with which to beat the back of society or the hierarchical church. It was only years later, reading a review of a book that dealt, among others, with Jean-Luc Marion, that it occurred to me that this problem could usefully be dealt with by addressing it in terms of conceptual iconicity and idolatry.

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I return to this discussion below in more detail in Chapter 1.2.1, when I consider some of the socio-anthropological research on the reaction of the poor to movements inspired by and inspirational for liberation theology.

Here reference could be made to the Christians for Socialism movement that began in Chile in the early 1970s, allied to the election of Salvador Allende and at the base of the article by Assmann cited above in note 3. For a good brief summary of this movement, see David Tombs, Latin American Liberation Theology, Boston / Leiden, Brill, 2002, pp.144-151.

In order that my own position should be clear, I need to state from the outset that I come to this work as someone who believes very strongly in the fundamental tenets of liberation theology. Thus, at least in part, I also question myself in what follows. My agreement with liberation theology, my commitment to its aims and my admiration of its practitioners rather encourage than limit my desire to understand its successes and limitations.

This is not just something from the past. As an example, the website www.redescristianas.net contains many articles and links which use terms such as “social exclusion” or “social economy” at least in part to critique the institutional church. Of course, this is not to say that the institutional church should not be criticised, but reading some of the articles one feels to be in a time warp. If the words and expressions which are being used have been genuinely appropriated, it may be that there is no problem. But too often the impression is that they have become rather ideological.


Extensive comment is made on this in the next chapter, 1.1.3. Just to cite one example here, Jorge Pixley and Clodovis Boff The Bible, the Church and the Poor, (trans. Paul Burns), Tunbridge Wells, Kent, Burns & Oates, 1989, chapter V, The Poor, Sacrament of God, p.109

See for example, The Catechism of the Catholic Church, no.1118, “They [the sacraments] are ‘for the Church’ in the sense that ‘the sacraments make the Church,’ since they manifest and communicate to [people], above all in the Eucharist, the mystery of communion with the God who is love, One in three persons.”
theology had in one of the key expressions of its methodology a way to allow this encounter to remain iconic. But the dangers of idolising the poor were still there, as my practical frustration had made clear to me. Although this will not be the main focus of this work, it is clear that liberation theology needs a more appropriate concept of sacrament in which the iconic aspect of our understanding of salvation is explicitly underscored. How can the poor be a symbol (icon, sacrament) of the God of the Kingdom which is already amongst us and still to come? In order to answer this question, it is my contention that liberation theology also needs to avail itself of ideas from elsewhere. What I want to examine in this thesis is what these ideas are, and how they, along with a careful application of liberation theology’s own methodology, can contribute to iconic encounters with the poor, to allowing each poor person to “[a]ct… in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is—Christ”.

This goes some way to explaining my title and sub-title. The title refers, as I note later, to a common Orthodox way of referring to icons as “windows to heaven”. My question, then, can be understood as asking how the poor can be allowed to remain as icons. The sub-title may need a slightly longer justification. It will become apparent that this is not a work solely about the theological method of Clodovis Boff. However, because, as I will argue, he has dealt more rigorously with the problem of method than any other liberation theologian and has also been constantly aware of the problems of taking ideological shortcuts, I have endeavoured to give a clear account of his method and its development over the past thirty years. Nevertheless, I have done so with a particular goal in mind. For my question is to do with how liberation theology can allow the poor to remain iconic, to be the other who challenges the theologian and enables her or him to encounter the living and liberating God at work in the world. My contention is that the method of Clodovis Boff will give us at least a good start in that task. Thus, I need to consider potential threats to the alterity of the poor and the ways in which Boff’s methodology can avert these dangers.

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15 See Chapter 3.2.1, with references to some texts on this subject.
A Theoretical Treatment of a Practical Problem

Because I am concerned with the problem or danger of the poor becoming conceptual idols, my treatment will remain at a theoretical level. This, however, is also consonant with the approach of Clodovis Boff in his exposition of the methodology of liberation theology. So, my question is about the concept or category$^{16}$ of the poor, and how that is prevented from becoming idolatrous. This at least prevents us from the “noble savage” approach which is sadly not uncommon in some European attempts to address the poor.$^{17}$ The other poor may be good or bad, but that does not alter my duty to them as the other who commands.

It is also important to bear in mind that the division between theoretical and practical is, in a sense, at the heart of the problem. The pastoral agents and others$^{18}$ were motivated by a deep sense of commitment, which too often could not see beyond the immediate need for action. Thus, they assumed that theory could be done away with. However, that itself is a theoretical approach, and one which does not seem to have worked. Thus, if I write theoretically, it is with the firm belief that theory and praxis, as Boff’s method will argue, are in a mutually enriching and non-synthesising dialectical relationship. The questions of practice and the implications for practice are part of every treatment of theory.

The Reader

This work is written with several groups in mind. I write it first for those who are interested in Latin American liberation theology, and especially its methodology. It would be presumptuous of me to say that I write it for liberation theologians, although I hope that they may find something of interest in it. I also write for students of liberation theology in Europe, North America and elsewhere (including Latin America) who are interested in its relevance to their situations, assuming that they will have to address related questions in their work.

However, I also believe this book will be of use to those who are interested, or perhaps just curious, as to how the thought of Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion might be of relevance to liberation theology. I hope to show that their ideas have a wider application than the more usual concentration on ontology or ethics might suggest. In this sense, I trust that this work can serve as a bridge between two hitherto diverse worlds.

Finally, because this is a work about liberation theology, I also write for at least some of those who practise lives of service to the poor, in the hope

$^{16}$ I address what I mean by this more in Chapter 1, p.20

$^{17}$ I am not necessarily thinking of theological works here, but some of the enthusiasm for base communities had, and sometimes still has, something of this tone.

$^{18}$ I recall some of my fellow students. Questions such as “But what has Chalcedon got to do with the poor?” were not uncommon.
that I can give them a language to allow the poor to remain for them the challenging and commanding other. Given that frustration with the language of pastoral practice was one of the motivating factors for writing this book, it seems only fair to give reasons for this frustration and suggest ways to avoid the kind of language that led to my initial objections.

**The Present and Future of Liberation Theology**

Before moving on to discuss the structure and method of my own work, I need to consider the current status of liberation theology. My aim is not, as such, to defend it, but I do want to claim that it is still a valid topic of study. Hugo Assmann was one of the very first liberation theologians, often cited for his insistence on the poor as being subjects of their own history and for his call for a practical theology of liberation. He begins a collection of essays published in 1994 on economy and theology with the following rather mordant words:

One of the worst things that ever happened to liberation theology was – because of a desire to be respected and above all because of attacks – to have been forced to talk too much of itself. It became self-referential in many cases. There have been, apart from this, the almost uncountable dissertations on liberation theology.

There is some truth in this, especially in the past twenty years. At times the debate about the future of liberation theology seems to be the major current contribution it has to make. And yet, the question is not altogether unimportant. Was liberation theology an aberration, from which there is nothing worth saving, or is it a genuine contribution to theology which contains insights which are of sufficient value to all theology that every effort must be made to safeguard them?

Rather than try to examine all the writings on liberation theology and its future, I will focus on a text by the Venezuelan Jesuit, Pedro Trigo – his

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19 Hugo Assmann was born in Brazil in 1934. Forced into exile by the military regime in Brazil, he also had to move around Latin America for some time, avoiding rightwing dictatorships. He later came to recognise the limits of some of the claims of early liberation theologians, including his own, as I note later (see reference in Chapter 1, p.36). He was involved in theology and education. He died in February 2008, at the age of 74.


22 A topic I discuss in more detail in Chapter 2

23 Hugo Assmann, *Crítica à Lógica da Exclusão: Ensaios sobre Economia e Teologia*, São Paulo, Paulus, 1994, p.13. I can only apologise for adding another to the list of theses, especially one dealing with method which is necessarily self-referential. But as I think that I am in sympathy with some of the criticisms which Assmann later came to make of his younger self, I hope that he will look down on me with benevolence!

24 Already in 1986, Clodovis Boff, “Retrato de 15 anos da Teologia da Libertação”, *REB* 46/182 (1986), pp.263-271, was asking, “Is liberation theology here to stay?” (p.264). He returned to the question in his article published shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Clodovis Boff, “Crise do Socialismo e Igreja da Libertação”, *Vozes* 84/3 (1990), pp.368-380, and in other articles, such as Clodovis Boff, “A Teologia da
inaugural address as rector of the Catholic University in Caracas. He begins by summarising what he takes to be the view of opponents of liberation theology:

Now, not only is it no longer possible to think of projects of liberation such as those that [liberation theology] proposed, but moreover there is no longer any group [collectivo] interested in them. Least interested of all are the poor, at whom this theology was directed. It was, like so many others, a project of the middle class, directed to the popular classes. It did not arise from them, nor was it assumed by them as their own. Thus, it died of irrelevance.

As we will see, this has been a not uncommon critique of liberation theology, seeing it as always and disastrously divided from what it claims as its roots. Trigo’s response to this criticism takes him through a lengthy consideration of the benefits and challenges to liberation theology. He begins by asking if liberation theology is Marxist. His answer to this includes a very important summary of what he sees as the chief theological contributions of liberation theology. This is crucially important. It often seems to me that liberation theology in Europe has been viewed more in terms of its socio-political role than as theology. In the Germanic languages, this view has been at times compounded by the placing of the adjective “liberation” before theology. However, the theology of liberation is always first and foremost a theology, and it is here that its contribution has to be examined. The following lengthy quotation will also serve well to outline what I understand by the theology of liberation in these pages. Trigo writes of liberation theology:

The centrality of the concepts highlighted by this theology cannot be doubted: the God of life committed with humanity to its full humanisation, whose paradigm is Jesus, the God of the poor, the God who sets free the oppressed people, the God of the prophets who fights sacred and secular idolatries, who sides with the victims
against the oppressor, and keeps hope alive with his promises. *Jesus of Nazareth*, a rural worker, who lived almost all his life in the bosom of the people from where he drew his inexhaustible and paradoxical wisdom, the poor Messiah of the poor, whose innermost being was moved at seeing the people burdened and beaten down, who proclaimed beatitudes to the poor, because they are the addressees of the Kingdom of God, who links entry into life to having pity on them, who is as human as only the Son of God could be, a model of leadership, who knows each one and allows himself to be known, who goes before all in horizontal service and in front of the people to the point of giving his life for them, who ended up on a cross like the condemned of history, who is vindicated by God, who sends over all flesh his liberating Holy Spirit, whose body in history is the people who have to bear the burden of the sin of the world, who proclaims that the fate of each one is linked to what they do or do not do for this people. The *Church* of all as the Church of the poor, whose heart is the poor with spirit, historical sacrament of salvation, in following the history of Jesus with his own Spirit, the Church whose leaders do not dominate nor have themselves called benefactors, but rather serve fraternally as their master did, the Church which recognises that the action of God, of its Lord and of the Spirit, which it supports, extends beyond its own borders…

This Trinitarian understanding of liberation theology, along with its ecclesiological implications, seems to me to get to the heart of what the theologians whose work I discuss in the following chapters have been trying to do. It is also Trigo’s response to charges of Marxism. He recognises the failings of liberation theology, how it has not always known how to love its enemies, but he also acknowledges what it has been able to do.

A further question about liberation theology is whether it is not too much a child of its times to have any future in a very different world. The usual way of framing this is to say that it was, like the Second Vatican Council, a product of a time of great optimism and political hope. The hopes have now been, so the critics would suggest, fatally damaged, and the new climate of globalisation and political realism (or apathy, which is not quite the same thing) render anything like a theology of liberation impossible. Trigo responds that liberation theology does still have a role in this setting, since it continues to argue that other projects, other possibilities are present.

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29 Trigo, “Ha muerto la teología de la liberación? (I), pp.51-52. The original is equally tortuous in its sentence construction!
30 Ibid., p.50. The consequence of this, he notes, is that the transcendence which that love should bring was lost and that therefore “the love of the people was also not transcendent, even if it was a sincere and sacrificial love”.
31 Ibid., pp.52-57
32 For example, the war years were behind, nations across Africa and Asia were at last regaining their independence, the Cuban revolution was still young.
33 Trigo, “Ha muerto la teología de la liberación? (I), p.53. This defence of the utopian value of liberation theology will be worth bearing in mind when I discuss the topic of utopia in Chapter 2
The relationship with the people, which Trigo touched on at the beginning, is one he returns to. For him, liberation theology is “of the people” for the very simple reason that it has always been good news for the poor. In that sense, it has indeed been accepted by and arisen from the people, for the good news they have heard has been precisely good news for them. Nevertheless, he also recognises that the relationship between liberation theology and the people has not been straightforward. Thus, he defines liberation theology as “the theology which is done by those who have entered in contact with the people in a mutual and horizontal way, and have made of this encounter the perspective from which they see reality”. It is from this contact that liberation theology, for Trigo, must continue to spring, so that despite the changing times, the complexity of the themes, and the new subjects, it can continue to be that Trinitarian theology which speaks of God as good news for the poor.

In order for liberation theology to continue, then, it must retain the same attitude it had in the beginning, which will necessarily lead to different questions being asked, since the times are different. Thus, for Trigo, it is possible to say that liberation theology exists because “there are theologians who position themselves to the current reality with the same pathos and ethos of the foundational period”. This may seem a somewhat simple, if not simplistic answer – liberation theology has a future for as long as people continue to do theology in the attitude which the first liberation theologians had. However, it is precisely this methodological attitude – the pathos and ethos – that is of crucial importance, as we will see in the course of my study. Reflecting on Gustavo Gutiérrez’s question about where the poor sleep, Trigo says that the one who does theology from this real and dense question, from this radical way of being affected and questioned (exigido) by people, not by things, and especially by

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34 He uses the word popular, which cannot simply be translated here in English as “popular”, hence my use of the descriptive phrase “of the people”, in the sense, for example, of “a man of the people”. There is always an overtone of what might be called “the masses” in the word.

35 Trigo, “Ha muerto la teología de la liberación? (I)”, p.58

36 Ibid., pp.59-60

37 Ibid., pp.63ff.

38 Ibid., pp.67-72. These include women, Amerindians, Afro-Latin-Americans.

39 Pedro Trigo, “Ha muerto la teología de la liberación? La realidad actual y sus causas (II).” Revista Latinoamericana de Teología 22 (2005), p.288. See also on this Victor Codina SJ, “A Teologia Latino-Americana na Encruzilhada”, PerspTeol 31 (1999), pp.181-200, and especially pp.181-184, where he outlines three possible positions: Give up and go backwards, continue going on as if nothing had changed, or go ahead, reflecting on the past in search of new ways for the future. He favours the third, as I think it would be fair to say does Trigo.

40 Trigo, “Ha muerto la teología de la liberación? (II)”, p.291

41 Trigo refers to an article by Gustavo Gutiérrez in the journal Paginas, but see also Gustavo Gutiérrez, Onde dormirão os pobres?, São Paulo, Paulus, 1998.
people who are less valued in the market or who have no value, such a person does liberation theology.\textsuperscript{42}

This is the attitude of liberation theology, and it is much more difficult to deny the presence of an attitude. Thus, with all the problems which are faced, including in adopting and maintaining such an attitude, liberation theology, for Trigo, has a future, not least because “liberation theology is conceived, definitively, as a theology of hope”.\textsuperscript{43} While the poor exist – and Jesus told us that that would be always – there is a place for a theology which seeks to speak a word of hope, of liberation, of salvation to the situation in which the poor live, with all its complexities. One such theology is the theology of liberation.

\textbf{Research on Method in Liberation Theology}

Two important anniversaries for liberation theology occurred in 2008. July 22\textsuperscript{nd} 2008 was the fortieth anniversary of Gustavo Gutiérrez’s first use of the phrase “liberation theology” in a talk to a group in Chimbote in Peru.\textsuperscript{44} It was also the fortieth anniversary of the Second General Conference of CELAM, the Latin American Bishops’ Council, which occurred in Medellín, Colombia from 26\textsuperscript{th} August – 6\textsuperscript{th} September 1968.\textsuperscript{45} In the intervening period, there has been a considerable amount of reflection on liberation theology. I do not intend to examine all that scholarship. Probably the major work in methodology is the one I consider by Clodovis Boff. He stands head and shoulders above all others in his contribution to the reflection on method in Latin American liberation theology, a factor recognised by his peers as well as others.\textsuperscript{46}

I have chosen Boff for a number of reasons. The other major candidate for the task of reflecting on methodology would have been Juan Luis Segundo, the Uruguayan Jesuit theologian who was perhaps the first to start to reflect theologically on the reality of Latin America.\textsuperscript{47} My choice of Boff over

\textsuperscript{42}Trigo, “Ha muerto la teología de la liberación? (II)”, p.293
\textsuperscript{43}Ibid., p.311
\textsuperscript{44}Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Towards a theology of liberation”, translated in Alfred Hennelly, \textit{Liberation Theology: A Documentary History}, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1990, pp.62-76. As Hennelly makes clear, the ideas had been around before, but Gutiérrez was the first to give the new movement an easily memorable name. See Hennelly, \textit{Liberation Theology}, pp.xviii-xix, and David Tombs, \textit{Latin American Liberation Theology}, Boston / Leiden, Brill, 2002, pp.92-115. 2008 also saw Gutiérrez’s 80\textsuperscript{th} birthday and the 70\textsuperscript{th} birthday of Leonardo Boff.
\textsuperscript{45}For a brief summary of Medellín by another leading liberation theologian, writing from the perspective of the 5\textsuperscript{th} General Conference of CELAM, which took place in Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007, see João Batista Libanio, \textit{Conferências Gerais do Episcopado Latino-Americano do Rio de Janeiro a Aparecida}, São Paulo, Loyola, 2007, pp.21-25
\textsuperscript{46}As I will treat Boff at much greater length in Chapter Four, I do not add here any further details. Literature will be cited in the relevant places in that chapter.
Segundo has practical as well as more theoretical grounds. Practically, having lived and studied in Brazil, it is easier for me to work with a Brazilian author. Uruguay, on the other hand, is a very special case in South America, being perhaps the only predominantly secular country in the continent. It would also, I suggest, be true to say that Segundo is much admired, but little followed, whilst Boff is little admired, but much followed. In other words, it is Boff’s methodology, in some form, that has been most generally adopted. Theoretically, Boff’s methodology also offers me a very clear model, which will enable me both to display the problems and the ways in which those problems are dealt with. In working with questions of epistemological rupture, it permits me to introduce the work of other thinkers who will help strengthen the arguments made by Boff.

There have, however, also been other works which reflect on the method of liberation theology and on some of the themes which I consider. One of the works which I have found helpful in summarising the methodology of the first thirty years of liberation theology is by Paulo Sérgio Lopes Gonçalves, Liberationis Mysterium.\(^{48}\) His aim, he says, is “to analyse liberation theology as a systematic project, in the light of the *regula fidei*, to verify its legitimacy and its possible *lacunae*”.\(^{49}\) At the time at which he writes (1997) he notes five studies on the question of epistemology and method in liberation theology. One is from the mid-seventies,\(^{50}\) and now of mainly historical interest, dealing as it does with the first few years of the then new theology. Another is an excellent introduction to the theology and method of Juan Luis Segundo.\(^{51}\) A third is a general overview of the situation in Latin America as of the late eighties,\(^{52}\) whilst the other two\(^{53}\) are referred to later on in my own study. Gonçalves also includes a detailed reflection on the question of epistemology and method in liberation theology, discussing mainly the version given by Clodovis Boff in *Mysterium Liberationis*.\(^{54}\)

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49 Gonçalves, *Liberationis Mysterium*, p.7


There are many works which give an overview of Latin American theology, including sections on methodology. Important works here include those of João Batista Libanio, Francisco Taborda, Agenor Brighenti and Pedro Rubens, to name only Brazilian authors. Another very valuable resource is a collection edited by Juan-José Tamayo and Juan Bosch, which asked more than thirty liberation theologians to reflect on their lives and theological engagement. In doing so, several of them consider questions of method.

The role of the poor – sometimes the word “people” is used instead – has also been discussed, though usually in descriptive terms. There is little that is very self-critical about the use of the “poor”, though some writers have noted problems. The ambiguities of the use of the term “people” have been studied by an Argentinian theologian, Guillermo Fernández Beret. His book is in some ways closest to what I have undertaken here. Beret has noted the problems that liberation theology has in being clear by what it means when it refers to the “people” – pueblo in Spanish, povo in Portuguese. He traces the way this concept is used in liberation theology, pointing to the ambiguities already present both in Vatican II and in the documents of Medellín and Puebla. Several of his conclusions anticipate

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56 Taborda, like Libanio, a Jesuit, is best-known as a sacramental theologian, especially for his foundational work, Francisco Taborda, Sacramentos, praxis e festa: para uma teologia latinoamericana dos sacramentos, Petropolis, Vozes, 1987. However, he wrote an article in the mid-eighties which offered a very clear and helpful summary of five strands of method in liberation theology: “Métodos Teológicos na América Latina”, PerspTeol 19 (1987), pp.293-319. I return to this below in Chapter Four.

57 Also considered below, Brighenti, a diocesan priest from the south of Brazil, wrote Raízes da epistemologia e do método da teologia da libertação: o método ver-julgar-agir da ação católica e as medições da teologia latino-americana, Medellín 78 (1994), pp.207-254


59 Juan-José Tamayo, Juan Bosch (eds.), Panorama de la Teología Latinoamericana: Cuando Vida y Pensamiento son Inseparables, Estella (Navarra), Verbo Divino, 2002

60 I consider this point further in the following chapter.

my own in this work. The difference lies in my giving a new language to describe the problem, and in suggesting ways in which these conclusions can be achieved.

There have been a number of important recent works on liberation theology which deserve to be noted, though they deal with slightly different questions. Daniel Bell has sought to investigate the current status of liberation theology “after the end of history”. Bell argues that liberation theology needs a new way of doing politics, based on a therapy of forgiveness and which escapes the parameters of the capitalist order which liberation theology has hitherto been bound by. For him, liberation theology’s problem has been that it has been caught in the type of modern thinking which gave rise to capitalism, and this has meant that it has been unable to develop its own counter-position. Stephen Long has argued something similar in his more or less contemporaneous treatment of liberation theology’s engagement with capitalism. An attempt to suggest new ways in which liberation theology might develop has been made by Ivan Petrella. Petrella argues that liberation theology has never successfully come to terms with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the defeat of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. It has remained wedded to a vision of socialist democracy which is no longer capable of giving it a historical project. Petrella’s analysis is worth reading, though I am not convinced that he avoids the problems of utopian thinking which Franz Hinkelammert criticises. His more recent book is also of interest, though whether his choice of poverty as the unifying theme will allow the problems I discuss in this book to be avoided is a moot point. As will become apparent during the course of this work, I have often drawn on these writers and others. However, my aim is somewhat different to

62 For example, he argues that “The ‘people’ have to be found in the consciousness that they have of themselves in history”, Beret, El Pueblo en la Teología de la Liberación, p.284, or “The Latin American people are the people of God as the depository of a common vocation to be, in the communion of the Church, a sacrament of salvation in the history of the continent”, p.286
66 This is at best. On the changing, but ambiguous relationship of liberation theology with democracy, see Ian Maclean, Opting for democracy? Liberation theology and the struggle for democracy in Brazil, New York, Peter Lang, 1999
67 I discuss this below in Chapter 2.2.4
69 For the sake of somewhat greater completeness, I add here, by way of example, some further works which I have used. A good overview, especially historical, is found in David Tombs, Latin American Liberation Theology, Leiden, Brill, 2002. Reflections on liberation theology’s development are contained in Luiz Carlos Susin (ed.), O Mar Se Abriu, São Paulo, Loyola / SOTER, 2000 and Luiz Carlos Susin (ed.), Sarça Ardente: Teologia na América Latina – Prospectivas, São Paulo, SOTER/Paulinas, 2000.
that of these authors. For example, the work of Emmanuel Levinas is increasingly playing a part in liberation theology. But it has not been used self-critically, to analyse and question liberation theology’s treatment of the poor. I believe that in doing this I am offering a new way of applying Levinas’ work to liberation theology. As for Jean-Luc Marion, he remains scarcely known in the writings of liberation theology. Thus in using his work to address questions of liberation theology I am making a new contribution. More generally, in addressing what is a central tenet of liberation theology, I am opening a discussion that touches on the real contribution of that theology and also the risks it runs. To repeat, I do this from a position of broad agreement with the aims of liberation theology, and I intend my work to be critically supportive of that theology.

**Aim and Method of the Research**

The aim of this study can be summed up briefly. I want to show how Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion can contribute, through their stress on, respectively, the other, the third, the nature of conceptual icons and idols and what is given and the one who is gifted, to an enriching or rounding out of the method of liberation theology as developed in its most extensive form by Clodovis Boff.

To do this, I adopt a very simple method, one which I hope demonstrates also what it is that I want to say about liberation theology and its own method. I will argue that it is only by constantly being encountered by the other poor that liberation theology can avoid the threat of turning the poor


I treat this in slightly more detail later on in the thesis. Names such as Luiz Carlos Susin, Ulpiano Vasquez, Enrique Dussel and Maria Clara Bingemer can be mentioned here, but they are not alone.
into idols. This encounter brings with it the need to listen and to be challenged and to respond. Thus, as far as possible, I seek to give voice to liberation theologians, to listen with critical sympathy to what they say, to the challenges they bring, and also to what they ignore or fail to emphasise sufficiently. At least to some degree, I also follow the method proposed by Clodovis Boff which I will explore in greater detail later in my study. I treat the liberation theologians I employ as providers of the raw material\textsuperscript{71} to be addressed. This raw material is subjected to a critical judgement, which asks continuously how well the raw material is suited to allowing the poor to remain other and iconic.

It may be helpful already at this point to say something more of why I have chosen to use both Levinas and Marion. As will become clear in later chapters, Levinas in particular is becoming increasingly influential in liberation theology. His ontological critique\textsuperscript{72} with its giving of primacy to the ethical has – in some sense and for some theologians – replaced dependency theory\textsuperscript{73} as a hermeneutical tool for understanding the marginalisation of the poorer world, since ideas of totality are present at both an inter-personal and an inter-communal and ultimately inter-national level. It is therefore clearly justifiable to consider Levinas in this work.

Jean-Luc Marion is hardly known in liberation theology and it or works associated with it contain very few references to him. However, the absence of any references hitherto is clearly in itself of no great import. The question is, rather, whether Marion has anything to offer to the debate. First, it should be noted that, although influenced by Levinas, Marion operates from a slightly different starting point. There are important differences as well as similarities between the two thinkers which can make them complementary partners for liberation theology. In particular, it seems to me that Marion’s insights into the nature of conceptual icons and idols is needed by Levinas in his ethical plea.

In addition, though I shall argue that Levinas’ approach is not quite as overwhelmingly transcendent as some of his critics argue, it is true that Marion gives us with his concept of iconicity a greater possibility for considering the presence of the immanent without it becoming necessarily totalitarian. One possible explanation for this lies in the fact that Levinas argues from his strong commitment to Judaism, whilst Marion argues from a Christian Trinitarian perspective. Whereas his theology might appear at odds with liberation theology,\textsuperscript{74} the commitment to the central paradox of Christian faith, that in Jesus the utterly transcendent is also fully immanent, has a profound influence on his philosophy. Thus, even though I will not

\textsuperscript{71} For an explanation of this theme, see below, Chapter 4
\textsuperscript{72} Bibliography on Levinas can be found in Chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{73} See Chapter 2 for more on this.
\textsuperscript{74} He is closely associated with the somewhat conservative Catholic journal Communio, for example.
manage to develop in this work all of the implications of Marion’s philosophy for liberation theology, it seems to me an important dialogue to initiate, in which Levinas will also have a continuing corrective role to play.

**Some Limitations**

Needless to say, I neither intend nor claim to cover every aspect of liberation theology in this work. It is important therefore to note at the beginning what I do not address. I am well aware, as I look at the bibliography and consider the arguments present in this book, that nearly all the authors I have worked with are men. This, in part, is due to the sad reality that most liberation theologians remain men, though there are signs that the situation is slowly changing, even in Latin America. It is also due to the way in which I have chosen to approach the topic of idolatry, which has stressed the economic and social rather than relational aspects.

An important work on the relationship between liberation theology and feminist theology, especially in terms of praxis, is that of the Finnish scholar, Elini Vuola.\(^{75}\) Equally important in Brazil has been the contribution of writers such as Maria Clara Bingemer\(^{76}\) and Ivone Gebara.\(^{77}\) Like much liberation theology, their work touches on methodological questions. This is true particularly, perhaps, in their work on Mary, which points very strongly to the importance of solidarity, of God with humanity in Jesus, but also of humanity with humanity in Mary. It would be particularly valuable to consider what these authors and others\(^{78}\) contribute to the development

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\(^{75}\) On this, see Elina Vuola, *Los Límites de la Liberación. La Praxis como método de la Teología de la Liberación Latinoamericana y de la Teología Feminista*, (Trans. Janeth Solá de Guerrero), Colección Textos 20, Madrid, IEPALA Editorial, 2000, of especial relevance because of its insistence on a proper understanding of praxis.

\(^{76}\) Maria Clara Bingemer, one of the very first laywomen to study theology in Brazil, is now dean of the humanities faculty at the PUC (Pontifical Catholic University) in Rio de Janeiro, and one of the leading contemporary Brazilian theologians. She is the author of many books and articles. To cite just some works, see among the books, Maria Clara Bingemer, *O Lugar da Mulher*, São Paulo, Loyola, 1990; *Mulher e Relações de Gênero*, São Paulo, Edições Loyola, 1994; *A Experiência de Deus num Corpo de Mulher*, São Paulo, Edições Loyola, 2002 and among the articles, Maria Clara Bingemer, “La Mujer: Figura Espiritual y Caminos Abiertos”, *Cuadernos de Espiritualidad* 121 (May-June 2000), pp.3-35; “Abbá: Un Padre Maternal”, in *Estudios Trinitarios* 35/1 (2002), pp.69-102. Her recent work on Simone Weil should also be mentioned. See, for example, Maria Clara Bingemer, *Simone Weil. A força e a fraqueza do amor*, Rio de Janeiro, Rocco, 2007


\(^{78}\) For example, one of the earliest writers on this subject, Maria Pilar Aquino, “Lateinamerikanische Feministische Theologie” in Raul Fornet-Bettancourt (ed.), *Befreiungstheologie: Kritischer Rückblick und Perspektiven für die Zukunft* Band 2: Kritische Auswertung und neue Herausforderungen, Mainz, Mathias-Grünewald Verlag, 1997, pp.291-323; and the following essays in Luiz Carlos Susin (ed), *Sarça*
of methodology in liberation theology, especially in helping it to escape the rigidity of the logic of the excluded middle.
I am also aware that it would have been possible, perhaps even desirable, to have carried out a similar and comparative exercise with the concept of “liberation”, the other central idea in liberation theology. I have chosen to concentrate on the poor, because idolatry is an even greater danger to them. To make liberation an idol has less immediately drastic effects on other human beings than making the poor idols. If, on the other hand, ways can be found of allowing the poor to become and remain iconic, they will also be applicable to liberation. Nevertheless, the problems which liberation theology has in dealing with the topic of liberation have not gone unnoticed. 79
Thirdly, I have restricted myself to Latin American liberation theology and within that, more specifically though not exclusively to Brazil. This is primarily because the Latin American – and especially Brazilian – context is one with which I have some familiarity. It is also the place where liberation theology as such began and where the problem of the poor has been most central. I presume and hope, however, that what I have to say is applicable to other situations and contexts in which liberation theology is practised. However, this presumption will have to be tested by others.
Fourthly, the authors with whom I interact in this work are predominantly Roman Catholic. This is to some degree inevitable, given that I am working with Latin American authors, and Latin America remains predominantly Roman Catholic. However, this is not to ignore or underestimate the many Protestant writers who have engaged in liberation theology. I refer to some of them throughout this work. A recent summary can be found in a book on liberation themes in evangelicalism by Sharon Heaney, which also contains a full bibliography. 80
I have also in general privileged earlier works rather than later ones, mainly because, in terms of methodology, later works do not seem to me to bring much substantially new. Frequent claims that the understanding of the poor has become more complex, even if true, do not reduce the possibility of

79 The best work I know on this subject, indeed one of the best self-critical books I have read by a liberation theologian, is José Comblin, Called for Freedom: The Changing Context of Liberation Theology, (trans. Philip Berryman), Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis, 1998
80 See Sharon Heaney, Contextual Theology for Latin America: Latin American Themes in Evangelical Perspective, Milton Keynes, Paternoster, 2008
making idols of them. Indeed, one might argue that the possibility increases with each sub-division.

Structure
The structure of the work is as follows. The first chapter begins with a consideration of how the poor have in fact been treated in liberation theology. It will be clear that there has been a wide variety of approaches and emphases. Some socio-anthropological research will then be examined, to see how the poor seem to have responded to liberation theology or at least the base communities with which it is closely allied and in comparison also to neo-Pentecostal groups. One sample criticism of liberation theology’s concept of the poor will then be discussed. This chapter both presents and questions liberation theology’s use of the category of the poor, noting its strengths and actual or at least potential weaknesses.

The second chapter narrows the focus. It deals first with liberation theology’s retrieval of the notion of idolatry as a language to describe the current global capitalist economy. Thus, idolatry is first viewed in relation to the economy and economics. Alternatives are considered in the form of different utopias which liberation theology has developed. At the same time, the risks and dangers of utopic thinking are also examined. This leads me on to a discussion of ideology, which I link with idolatry. I discuss how liberation theology itself has understood ideology, and some other relevant contributions to the debate concerning ideology. I address the fairly frequent accusations that liberation theology is itself ideological. I conclude the chapter with an examination of one of liberation theology’s responses to the problem of idolatry and ideology, its insistence on the presence and transforming power of the God of Life.

My third chapter interrupts the direct treatment of liberation theology. I begin with a historical excursion. The Iconoclastic controversy, culminating in the Second Council of Nicaea, marks the one time the church in council has seriously considered what it is that makes something iconic. Thus I present the issues at stake in the controversy, and the conciliar response. My point here is twofold. I applaud the Council for its recognition of the transcendent possibilities inherent in the material, thus opening the way for the claim that the poor can indeed be iconic. On the other hand, I note that the phrasing of the council’s documents is such that in practice it creates a new form of totality, thus effectively denying the transcendence it seeks to defend by its ideological approach. At this point, I introduce Emmanuel Levinas. To talk about the alterity of the poor necessitates a more general discussion of alterity, which Levinas made a central plank of his philosophy. But in order that “the just man justifies”, it is necessary also,
Levinas argues, to introduce the figure of the third, the other of my other. This, I point out in a brief return to liberation theology, is a facet of Levinas’ thought that has been largely ignored by Enrique Dussel, one of the major points of encounter between liberation theology and Levinas. The use of the word ‘totality’ above refers not only to Levinas, but also to one possible way of describing idols. Jean-Luc Marion has developed a carefully thought-out body of work examining the nature of conceptual icons and idols, and I turn to him finally in Chapter Three. He will give me, in the first place, a language to discuss the problem which has been hovering over the previous chapters and is implicit in my title, concerning icons and idols. Second, in his discussion of the phenomenon of givenness and the figure of l’adonné he offers a further contribution to understanding the role of the liberation theologian in encounter with the other poor.

In the fourth chapter, having established the nature of the problem and some potential responses from elsewhere, I turn to the theological method of Clodovis Boff to see whether this method can safeguard the poor and allow them to remain icons. This chapter presents a careful reading of Boff’s work over the past thirty years, something which is almost non-existent in English to date. I finish with a Conclusion that brings Levinas, Marion and Boff together, to suggest a way in which liberation theology can proceed that will help it to avoid the idolising of the poor.

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81 Most writers use either his major methodological work, the doctoral thesis Teologia e Prática, or at best, his article in the Mysterium Liberationis collection on method, a reworking in summary form of his doctoral thesis. Some other authors have considered some of his writing, in relation to politics (for example, Ian Maclean, Opting for Democracy), or on base communities. There have been two recent considerations of his wider work in terms of methodology, both of which I came across in the very final stages of my research. Chronologically, the first is an important PhD dissertation by Joseph Carry, Methodological Creativity: The Foundational Contribution of Bernard Lonergan and Clodovis Boff to a Global Theology of Liberation, PhD Dissertation, Fordham University, New York, 2005. Carry does consider some other later works by Boff, and discusses both the way in which he develops and remains the same. However, he does so with reference almost exclusively to works available in English which somewhat limits his choice. Nevertheless, I think that my work is in broad agreement with Carry’s approach. The second work, less satisfactory in my view, is Jennifer Garvin-Sanchez, Constructing a Liberation Theology of the Political: A Case Study Combining the Epistemologies of Clodovis Boff’s Theology of the Political and the Liberation Theology of Gustavo Gutierrez, PhD dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, 2006.