INTRODUCTION
The title of this chapter draws on a book by Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Las Casas: in search of the poor of Jesus Christ.* In this chapter, I propose to engage in this search, to try to discern who it is that liberation theologians mean when they refer to the poor. I do this by engaging with what some of the major representatives of liberation theology themselves have to say on the topic. Why is it that liberation theologians have found it so hard to define those whom they see as subjects of history and of theology?

In a dialogue organised between liberation theologians and the French cultural anthropologist and literary critic René Girard, Leonardo Boff offered the following assessment of liberation theology: “I think that the theology of liberation, on its strictly theological level, has two fundamental categories: the category poor, oppressed (and along with that, God of the poor, God of Life, etc.) and the category Kingdom of God”. Although the two categories are closely related, in this work I concentrate on the category poor.

Although the nature of the poor in liberation theology has not been the subject, on its own, of a special monograph, there are, nevertheless, a

---


4 On the poor as a “category”, see also André Corten, *Os Pobres e o Espírito Santo. O Pentecostalismo no Brasil,* Petrópolis, Vozes, 1996 (orig. French, 1995), p.13, p.207. What, then, is under discussion, is precisely what happens when the initial encounter with the poor is abstracted, as it necessarily must be in theological discourse.

5 A partial exception is José María Castillo, *Los Pobres y La Teología. ¿Qué queda de la Teología de la Liberación?*, Bilbao, Desclée de Brouwer, 1998, although this deals more with the theological implications of starting with the poor, without enquiring too much into who these poor are. There have been studies of the Option for the Poor, but part of my argument is that the option for the poor implies a pre-judgement as to who the poor are for whom one opts. On the use of the option for the poor in liberation theology, see, for example, the doctoral thesis of Julio Lois, *Teología de la Liberación: opción por los pobres,* Madrid, IEPALA 1986. Daniel G. Groody (ed.), *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology,* Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 2007 offers something closer to a reading of the situation of the poor in many different contexts in the world, with a special focus on feminist and African American experiences.
number of writings that deal more or less substantially with the topic. My aim in this chapter is to provide at least an overview of the different ways in which liberation theologians have understood the poor, in as far as possible using their own words. I have, however, sought to organise the material around a number of headings, which seem to me to encompass the different lines the attempts to portray and represent the poor have taken. Thus, I begin with a brief summary of liberation theology accounts of the Biblical record. This leads to a concentration on the ideas of God as God of the poor, the poor as icons of Christ, the Church as church of the poor and finally a consideration of the option for the poor. I focus on only a few authors or works, representative of the range of opinions without being necessarily exhaustive of every possible nuance. Underlying this examination are two questions which will be pertinent for the remainder of my thesis. My understanding of these two questions is informed by my readings of Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion. The first concerns the ways in which the otherness of the poor is construed. The second focuses on the extent to which the poor are presented as iconic. In other words, my reading of the treatment of the category poor in liberation theology is structured, at least partially, by my aim in this work, to see if and how liberation theology has a methodology which permits it to allow the poor to remain iconic and not to become idolatrous. This I will do through the perspective afforded by Marion and Levinas. Thus, in the first part of this chapter, I do not enter deeply into the socio-economic questions concerning the reality of poverty, even though these are foundational for liberation theology’s methodological approach.

---

6 Some examples of these will be given in the following chapter. Writers such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Jon Sobrino, Clodovis Boff, Leonardo Boff, and others whom I refer to all address the issue of who the poor are in their works.
7 I will not look at the history of theological treatments of the poor over the centuries. Some of this can be found in Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 1983. See also the article by Brian Daley, “The Cappadocian Fathers and the Option for the Poor”, in Groody (ed), *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology*, pp.77-88
8 In his bibliographical survey published in 1991, and dealing with works only in English, Ronald G. Musto, *Liberation Theologies: A Research Guide*, New York, Garland, 1991, reviews nearly 1300 works. Although it is true that slightly less than a quarter of them focus on Latin America, those works, plus subsequent works and works in Portuguese and Spanish add up to a vast amount of material. Much of it is, however, somewhat repetitive, so I believe that what I offer here is indeed a fair representation.
9 I concentrate on these two writers in Chapter 3. Here I draw attention to Levinas’ insistence on the primacy of the other for determining ethical response, and to Marion’s work on conceptual idols and icons.
10 What precisely I mean by this will be, as indicated in the previous note, the subject of Chapter 3, especially my treatment of Marion. For now it can suffice to say that I understand “iconic” to mean something that forces the gaze of the onlooker beyond itself, and especially in the context of my discussion here, beyond itself to God.
11 I will attend to this question in somewhat more detail in Chapter 2, when I turn to the question of idolatry and economic readings of the poor.
Socio-economic and political questions will, however, surface more in the second part of the chapter where I examine some anthropological research looking at the “success” or otherwise of liberation theology among its target group (i.e., the poor). Here principally I restrict myself to Brazil. I will also consider some of the theological critiques of liberation theology which condemn it for its insistence on the primacy of the poor. The chapter will conclude with a summary and an outline of the rest of the thesis.

1.1 Theological Approaches to the Poor in Liberation Theology

1.1.1 Who are the Poor?

Liberation theology, like all theology, seeks a biblical basis for its affirmations.\(^{12}\) Thus, from the beginning, it has sought to find biblical parallels or grounds for its insistence on the primacy of the poor as *locus theologicus*.\(^{13}\) This is worth noting, since liberation theology has often been interpreted as being more interested in Marx than the Bible, or at least of being guilty of serious misinterpretations of the Bible.\(^{14}\) However, liberation theology itself has always claimed that its themes are deeply and entirely rooted in the Scriptures. It is not, however, my intention to look in detail here at the way in which liberation theology has read the Bible.\(^{15}\)

Rather I aim to present briefly some of what has been said by liberation

---

\(^{12}\) For a detailed examination of three key ways in which it has sought to do this, see J.H. de Wit, *Leerlingen van de Armen: Een onderzoek naar de betekenis van de Latijnamerikaanse volks lezing van de bible in de hermeneutische ontwerpen en exegetische praktijk van C. Mesters, J.S. Croatto en M. Schwantes*, Amsterdam, VU Uitgeverij, 1991


\(^{14}\) See, for example, the conservative evangelical missiologist, David Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Kregel, 2005, p.124. He at least acknowledges that liberation theologians have paid attention to the Scriptures, but accuses them of misinterpreting texts about the poor to the grave detriment of Christian mission.

theologians concerning the place of the poor, first in the Old Testament and then in the New Testament. Thus, my interest is not at this point exegetical – what the Old and New Testaments actually have to say about the poor. Instead, I am interested in how liberation theologians have interpreted the Biblical evidence. At stake here is the fundamental hermeneutical question: what precisely is the key for reading the Bible? For the Brazilian biblical scholar Gilberto Gorgulho, “hermeneutics is... the discernment of the memory of the poor as origin of the texts and presentation of the happenings and structures of society.”

One of the things, then, that liberation theologians have also tried to do is liberate the biblical text from its role as *depositum fidei* to let it interact with the praxis of the poor. I do not propose to investigate all these questions in detail, but it is important to bear them in mind as I examine what liberation theologians have had to say about the place and description of the poor in the Bible.

### 1.1.1.1 Liberation Theology and the Poor in the Old Testament

Several readings of the Old Testament have suggested that the chief hermeneutical key for understanding the various books is precisely God's commitment to the liberation of his people. What then remains to be determined is who precisely these people, or this people, are. The starting point for liberationist readings, as is well-known, is found in the story of the Exodus, the story of a God who hears his people's cry and decides to come down to set them free from their oppression. (Ex. 3:7-10). For Jorge Pixley, “[Old Testament] theology is narrative, and the great majority of the books that make up this collection of writings recognise the foundational character of the story of the exodus”.

---

17 See for example, Croatto, *Die Bibel gehört den Armen*.
18 The debate over what to call the first segment of the Christian scriptures has not been germane to liberation theology’s discussions, and thus I use Old Testament, in conformity with the writers I am discussing. The issues at stake here are not primarily ones from the realm of Biblical Studies; rather, it is a question of the application of the Bible to life, and thus biblical theology. For an attempt at establishing a Jewish liberation theology, see Marc Ellis, *Towards a Jewish Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 1987
20 See Exodus 3:7-10
21 Jorge Pixley and Clodovis Boff, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor: Biblical, Theological and Pastoral Aspects of the Option for the Poor* (trans. Paul Burns), Tunbridge Wells, Burns and Oates, 1989,
liberation theology has sought to tease out and apply this narrative to its own situation.\textsuperscript{22}

This quest has led theologians to reflect primarily on the answer which the Old Testament gives to a very basic question: who is God, or, as Moses asks in the continuation of the initiation of the Exodus story, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you’, and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”\textsuperscript{23}

To be able to name Yahweh as its God, Israel is first enjoined to remember. As Deuteronomy 24:22 puts it, “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this.” To celebrate Yahweh as the God who sets his people free it is also necessary, especially for the rich and powerful, to remember from whence they came. What God did for them, they are now duty bound to do for others.\textsuperscript{24} Thus, a kind of double narrative begins, one which tells the story of the rich and powerful and their failure to do as they should, whilst at the same time telling the story of the poor and oppressed who continue to trust in the Lord. Indeed, one could say that at least part of the narrative tension of the Old Testament derives from the encounter between these two groups, even if the condemnation of those who abuse and oppress is a more dominant theme. Thus, whatever the historical basis for the claim, Yahweh is named and remembered as a God who favours the widow, the orphan and the stranger.\textsuperscript{25}

These particular people – the “faces” of the poor as the document from the third General Conference of CELAM (the Latin
American Council of Bishops) in Puebla puts it – are chosen because they emphasise that God is a God of life who has led his people from a land of death. To be a widow, an orphan, a stranger, is to be someone without land, and therefore without the possibility of growing food or pasturing animals, and thus without the means to provide sustenance. In other words, the attention to the widow, the orphan, the traveller, is not simply a case of what liberation theologians often dismiss as “assistentialism”, but a question of enabling people to live. As God brought his people out from a situation of slavery leading to death, so now Israel must make sure that its poor are freed from slavery and the threat of death.

It is above all in the prophets that we find condemnation of the failure to remember God’s liberating work for his people. Assuming that the prophetic books contained in the Old Testament cover a time span of some three or four centuries, ranging from Amos to perhaps Malachi, the denunciation of the abuse of the poor is one of the strongest unifying themes. The condemnations are not issued for their own sake, but because the types of behaviour to which they draw attention are indicative of the rupture of the covenant which God had made with his people. Pixley points out that the prophets continued to enjoy a certain freedom over against the court, and this was what allowed them to call it to account for its failures in covenant fidelity. The prophets remember the terms of the covenant – specifically as outlined in the law codes of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy – and, so liberation theology argues, constantly draw attention to its central point, which is the insistence on justice, or more fundamentally life, for the poor, those for whom the threat of non-life is most immediately present.

26 Puebla 31-39. See also the document issued by the Fifth General Conference in Aparecida, Brasil: Aparecida 402
27 See Hoppe, Being Poor, p.5
28 See, for example, Clodovis Boff, “Epistemología y Método de la Teología de la Liberación” in Sobrino and Ellacuría (eds.), Mysterium Liberationis, Vol. I, pp.79-113, here 102. In English, “Methodology of the Theology of Liberation”, in Sobrino, Ellacuría (eds.), Systematic Theology, pp. 1-21, here p.12. See also Pixley and Boff, The Bible, the Church and the Poor, p.128. For a definition of assistentialism, see Madeleine Adriance, Opting for the Poor: Brazilian Catholicism in Transition, Kansas City, Sheed and Ward, 1986, pp.17-18 (endnote 4, referring to p.14) “Assistentialism … is a term commonly used in Brazil to denote what people in the United States would probably call the social casework approach to the problem of poverty. It usually consists of giving money, food, used clothing and medical aid to people who are unable to work or whose employment does not provide adequate income to support their needs and / or the needs of their families. This concept has recently come under heavy attack by progressive Church people who point out the injustice of the whole income structure and who advocate replacing assistentialism with social activism aimed towards a more equitable distribution of … wealth…”
30 Pixley, Boff, The Bible, the Church and the Poor, pp.37-40
31 See also on this Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Memory and Prophecy”, in Groody (ed.), The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology, pp.17-38, here especially pp.22-23, 27-28
Understanding the poor as those from whom justice is withheld is also seen as a way of interpreting the Old Testament sources. Thus, anawim or ani are those who are downtrodden or broken, because they are, to use anachronistic language, alienated. Thus the Brazilian Jesuit Alvaro Barreiro notes:

the poor person is the defenceless human being, who has no opportunity to assert his or her rights before the justice system, because it is in the hands of the unjust, the violent, the powerful. Therefore that person is a victim of humiliation, abuse, and all kinds of injustice.\(^{32}\)

In a setting where life is understood in terms of social inclusion or exclusion, the social dimension of poverty is stressed even more than its economic or political facets.

Liberation theology has seen the Old Testament as a crucial contribution in the condemnation of oppression. The poor, the widows, orphans, and strangers, are poor because of the behaviour of the oppressors, those in Israel who are often so strongly attacked by the prophets. Moreover, it is these poor whom God has especially favoured. Gustavo Gutiérrez notes that “[t]he entire Bible, beginning with the story of Cain and Abel, mirrors God's predilection for the weak and abused of human history”.\(^{33}\) Thus, the Bible is read to tell us who God is, but not who the poor are.\(^{34}\) There is, however, an exception to this in Pixley's comments on the poor person in the psalms: “The supplicant as poor knows he is the object of Yahweh's special attention and approaches God with a confidence astonishing to the modern reader”.\(^{35}\) In calling down curses on his enemies, the poor person is briefly empowered. However, this remains something of an exception – mostly, the poor are the ones who need protection and need others to protest for them.

Liberation theology would want to avoid the danger of glorifying poverty.\(^{36}\) However, one of the dangers which is present if the poor are reduced to the

\(^{32}\) Alvaro Barreiro, *Basic Ecclesial Communities: The Evangelization of the Poor*, (trans. Barbara Campbell), Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 1982, (orig. 1977), p.14 Barreiro also notes (p.15) that questions of poverty come into focus much more in later sources, after the establishment of the monarchy, when social injustice was more prevalent than in the times of the tribal settlement.


\(^{34}\) The title of a Licentiate dissertation by a Brazilian Baptist student, Moisés Nascimento Gabriel, is indicative: “Deus e os Pobres: De Jó à Teologia da Libertação. Um Percurso da Solidariedade Divina com os Marginalizados”, FAFE, Belo Horizonte, Brazil, unpublished Master’s dissertation, 2006. In English the title is “God and the Poor: From Job to Liberation Theology. A Journey of Divine Solidarity with the Marginalised”. I am not criticising this reading of the Bible, since clearly the Bible does tell us about God, but merely pointing to the hermeneutical priorities and claims to knowledge about God’s plans. Gabriel contains a good treatment of Pixley, Boff, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor*, see pp.102-137

\(^{35}\) Pixley, Boff, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor*, p.48

status of passive victims of the power of unjust systems is suggested by an American Franciscan Biblical scholar, Leslie Hoppe:

Focusing on isolated texts from certain prophets leads to a spiritualisation of poverty which sees the poor person as the true representative of humanity. What is most damaging about such spiritualisation is that it leads to an acceptance of poverty and a failure to follow the prophets and protest against the existence of poverty which, according to those prophets, was a terrible scandal leading to divine judgement upon Israel.  

Hoppe is not here specifically criticising liberation theology itself, but the question remains: if it does manage to avoid doing this, what is it in its method that allows liberation theology to emphasise the chosenness of the poor, without conferring an aura of holiness on them?

1.1.1.2 Liberation Theology and the Poor in the New Testament

Once more in this section it will be possible to give only a fairly cursory glance at the way liberation theology reads the treatment of the poor in the New Testament. Liberation theology has focused not only on the Old Testament, but also on the New Testament. Nevertheless, although it has sought to use both Testaments, and as much as possible of both, there are clearly texts for which liberation theologians reach instinctively, and many of them tend to come from the Old Testament. However, on the other hand, almost any work by a liberation theologian draws on the presentation of Jesus in the gospels – especially the synoptics. To that extent, then, there is even more material than for the Old Testament. Thus, I seek here only to present the principal ideas concerning the poor which liberation theology has drawn from its reading of the New Testament.

In contradistinction to other Christian discourses, liberation theology has not on the whole found much in the Pauline letters to help it.

Pixley's summary may serve to indicate the general view:

---

37 Hoppe, Being Poor, p.87
38 Ibid., p.176 It is interesting to note that Lohfink argues that what is new in the Old Testament in comparison with other Ancient Near Eastern texts is the fact that Yahweh brings about systemic change, not simply charitable care for the poor. Lohfink, Option for the Poor, p.43
39 There are, needless to say, a large number of works which do deal with the Bible, including the New Testament, from a liberation perspective. Jorge Pixley, co-author of the book on the option for the poor, is one of the co-founders of RIBLA, Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latinoamericana, which, since 1989, has sought to apply liberation insights to Biblical interpretation. The number of articles on OT and NT themes is more or less identical.
40 There are, of course, exceptions, so for example, an issue of RIBLA (no.20, 1995/1) is devoted to Paul (entitled Pablo de Tarso: Militante de la fe). See also Barreiro, Basic Ecclesial Communities, pp.39-45, which takes as its main text 1Cor 1:18-31, the paradox of the strength of God's weakness, the distinction between true wisdom and strength and the folly of human endeavours to construct our own world apart from God in Christ. See also some interesting comments in Elsa Tamez, “Poverty, the Poor and the Option for the Poor: A Biblical Perspective”, in Groody (ed.), The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology, pp.41-54, especially here on Paul, 46-47
Paul saw in Jesus Christ God's solidarity with poor humanity. He was so impressed by the inherent poverty of humanity compared to the greatness of divine favour that the problem of the human differences between rich and poor was relegated to a secondary level in his thought. He did not offer any theological outline of the option for the poor, though he did touch on it in some cases of intra-church conflicts.\(^{41}\)

By far the most frequent references to New Testament writings in liberation theology are to the synoptic gospels.\(^{42}\) One starting point is to point to Jesus' own poverty. Thus, when Jesus speaks of the poor, he does not do so as an outsider, but as one who himself lives in poverty.\(^{43}\) This emphasis is used to stress the importance of solidarity, and especially of a liberative solidarity.\(^{44}\) Pixley notes that this stress may be what underlies the attacks on the Pharisees, since they too were with the poor, but that the burdens they imposed, in terms of keeping the law, tended in fact to become oppressive rather than liberating.\(^{45}\)

It is not only Biblical scholars who deal with the Bible from the perspective of liberation theology. It is also very clear that systematic theologians have drawn deeply on the work of the Biblical scholars and their own readings of the Scriptures in order to produce their theology. Perhaps especially in terms of Roman Catholic theology this is one of the less-remarked, but more important contributions of liberation theology to theology in general. One could see this as a particular example of the general climate of \textit{ressourcement}\(^{46}\) in Catholic theology in the second half of the twentieth century.

\(^{41}\) Pixley and Boff, \textit{The Bible, the Church and the Poor}, p.56

\(^{42}\) For a valuable exception, see the doctoral thesis presented at the Free University of Amsterdam by the Argentinian Biblical scholar René Kruger, originally in German, but also published as René Kruger, \textit{Pobres y Ricos en la Epístola de Santiago: El Desafío de un Cristianismo Profético}, Buenos Aires, Lumen, 2005, which also contains useful bibliographical material on liberation treatments of the New Testament.

\(^{43}\) See Pixley and Boff, \textit{The Bible, the Church and the Poor}, p.59 “Jesus is presented ..., as a poor man who showed solidarity with poor people”. Also, Hoppe, \textit{Being Poor}, p.148 “The gospels present Jesus as materially poor and his statements about the poor and the wealthy need to be heard from that perspective marked as it is by authenticity and realism”. Just how true these statements are is another question. Sean Freyne, in his work on Galilee at the time of Jesus, seems to suggest that the greater poverty was in the cities. See Sean Freyne, \textit{A Galiléia, Jesus e os Evangelhos: Enfoques literários e investigações históricas}, (trans. Tim Noble), São Paulo, Edições Loyola, 1996, esp. pp.138-147. Nevertheless, it is probably true to say that Jesus was poor, though clearly not a member of the very poorest stratum of society, a point which is worth bearing in mind when we consider the success of liberation theology in reaching the poor in Latin America. See also on Jesus’ own poverty, Tamez, “Poverty, the Poor and the Option for the Poor: A Biblical Perspective”, p.45

\(^{44}\) The notion of liberative solidarity is important in the methodological basis of liberation theology, too. See, for example, Clodovis Boff, “Epistemología y Método de la Teología de la Liberación”, pp.97-98

\(^{45}\) Pixley and Boff, \textit{The Bible, the Church and the Poor}, p.61

\(^{46}\) \textit{Ressourcement}, sometimes also referred to as \textit{la nouvelle théologie}, was a movement in Roman Catholic theology in the twentieth century. It is linked with French theologians such as Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar, and consisted in a return to the sources of Christian theology, especially the Patristic sources. See on this, for example, Marcellino d’Ambrosio, “Ressourcement theology, aggiornamento, and the hermeneutics of tradition” \textit{Communio} 18 (Winter 1991), and James Hanvey SJ, “In the Presence of
century. The re-appropriation of the Scriptures as the fundamental starting point for reflection on the person of Jesus Christ is particularly marked in liberation theology.

So, in his readings of the life of Jesus, Jon Sobrino, arguably the leading Christologist in Latin America, insists on a reading of the gospel narratives within a hermeneutical circle which begins from the standpoint of the poor. Thus, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are viewed as having something transformative to say to and about the poor. Sobrino does this through his focus on the ministry of Jesus as proclaimer of the Kingdom, which is good news for the poor, and in his reflection on the death of Jesus on the cross in solidarity with the crucified people. The praxis of Jesus is a prophetic one, in which the proclamation of the Kingdom occurs in word and deed, addressed to the poor constructively and, in terms of denunciation, to the enemies of the Kingdom. His death on the cross is one which is both religious and political. In dying on the cross, Jesus shows his solidarity with all humanity, but especially with the oppressed, all those who are unjustly deprived of life. Pixley addresses a similar theme in summary form as follows:

Jesus' public actions concentrated on the proclamation of the kingdom. His practice revolved around seeking the way to God. But because he understood that the Kingdom was preferentially for the poor, his religious practice brought him objectively into conflict with the authorities of his nation, authorities whose power rested on a religious Law. Jesus appreciated the political realities affected by his prophetic practice. It was not his intention to seize power, but to use the strength of the weak to unmask the falsity of the religious legitimation of the power of the temple and the Pharisees. By accepting the imminence of his death at the hands of these authorities Jesus was recognising that God's strength alone gave meaning to a political practice based on the poor and the weak.


It is also worth noting that liberation theology has, in its own way, been involved in the quest for the historical Jesus. For liberation theology this has not sprung so much from a positivist understanding of history as from the conviction that the historical reality of Jesus binds him in a particular way to the specific historic reality of the poor today. Liberation is found in the fact that Jesus was able to transcend the antagonistic forces of history.

See, for example, Jon Sobrino, Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth, (trans. Paul Burns, Francis McDonagh), Tunbridge Wells, Burns and Oates, 1993, p.35

The life and death of Jesus are the topic of Jesus the Liberator, whilst the resurrection, early church and early councils are covered in Jon Sobrino, La Fe en Jesucristo: Ensayo desde las victimas, Trotta, Madrid, 1999


Pixley and Boff, The Bible, the Church and the Poor, p.65
The poor are then in some sense the inspiration for the preaching of Jesus, since they are the principal, indeed only, addressees of the Kingdom. The Lucan manifesto is fulfilled, and the poor have the good news preached to them. As in the Old Testament injunctions to care for the poor were to do with giving life, so it is in Luke. For Sobrino, the “crippled, the blind and the paralysed are symbols of those who have no life, or have it to a lesser degree”.

There is discussion among exegetes as to whether Luke’s gospel is really so in favour of the poor, or whether it does not rather maintain the status quo. In general, liberation theologians have taken it at face-value, and much of the discussion focuses on this gospel. There are several important passages, including the Nazarene Manifesto, the message to John the Baptist’s followers and the Good Samaritan.

The way in which Jesus rephrases the lawyer’s question in this latter parable - “Who is my neighbour?” (v.29) becomes “Which of the three... proved himself neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?” (v.36) – is suggestive of Levinas’ claims, to which I turn in detail in chapter 3, concerning the priority of the other. That is to say, I do not choose my neighbour, my neighbour chooses me, and the parable asks, then, in essence, which of the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan, responds to that choosing, which of them allows himself to confront the face of the other with all the concomitant demands.

It may thus be instructive to look briefly at some responses to this parable from respectively Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino. Gutiérrez looks at this parable on several occasions, beginning with A Theology of Liberation. In a section on Christ as neighbour, dealing primarily with the story of the last judgement in Matthew, Gutiérrez notes that the one who proved...

---


54 Sobrino, The True Church and the Poor, Ibid., p.41


56 Luke 7:20-23

57 Luke 10:25-37

58 Attention can also be drawn to Leonardo Boff’s treatment of this passage in Leonardo Boff, When Theology Listens to the Poor, (trans. Robert Barr), San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1988, (orig.1984), Chapter 2, “The Mission of the Church in Latin America: To Be The Good Samaritan”, pp.32-49, and to Clodovis Boff, “Pastoral da Classe Média e a Teologia da Libertação”, REB 51/201 (1991), pp.5-28, here p.18. “The parable… shows that the journey towards life passes inescapably by the Fallen One at the side of the road… For Christ, it is impossible to meet God passing to one side of the poor man… It is impossible, therefore, to find the meaning of life… outside of the mediation of ‘mercy’ or of justice”.

59 Matthew 25:31-46
himself a neighbour was “the Samaritan who approached the wounded man and made him his neighbour. The neighbour ... is not the one whom I find in my path, but rather the one in whose path I place myself, the one whom I approach and actively seek”. Here the onus is clearly on the Samaritan as the one who actively seeks out his neighbour, and the victim is essentially left in the status of victim.

In a later collection of essays, The Density of the Present, Gutiérrez returns to this theme twice in brief remarks. On the first occasion, there is already some movement away from the previous position. He notes that the poor are pre-eminently our neighbours, because they are dehumanised. “Their 'distance' from the present socioeconomic order and the dominant culture makes the poor, the other, our neighbour before anyone else, as we have been taught from the outset of liberation theology by the parable of the Good Samaritan.” Thus already the poor are beginning to move from victimhood, existing primarily for the Samaritan to demonstrate his neighbourliness, to those who demand to be “enneighboured”, to have us respond to them as neighbours.

In the second essay, there is an even clearer Levinasian tone. He writes:

The text does not offer us a definition of the category “neighbour” nor a speech on charity or human solidarity. We stand before a simple but compelling comparison that calls us to have the capacity to be moved in the presence of a person who is abused and suffering and to effectively act to help that person.

Now the Samaritan – and thus by extension every Christian, every human being – is called on to respond to the one who has claims on us, the other, and above all the other abused and suffering. The progression in thought is not commented on, but it is there – from the poor as victim whom I choose to help to the poor as the one who commands and whom I am called in some way to assist, or even to replace.

For Sobrino, in the first place, Jesus himself lived as a good Samaritan. Above all else, this means in his view acting out of pity. Thus, the primary
response to the encounter with the other in his or her suffering is one of pity, albeit a pity that must lead to action. “Jesus’ pity was not just a feeling, but a reaction – and so action – to the suffering of others, motivated by the mere fact that this suffering was in front of him.”\textsuperscript{66} Pity is “a basic attitude and practice”.\textsuperscript{67} Although Sobrino does not make this explicit in this context, it would be reasonable to suggest that this reaction to the suffering in front of one is a primary motivating factor for liberation theology. The danger of putting the pity of the observer at the centre of the story, however, is that it emphasises the power of the Samaritan over against the inability of the victim. The former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once famously observed that “No one would remember the Good Samaritan if he’d only had good intentions—he had money as well.”\textsuperscript{68} Does the exercise of pity depend on the power of the one who pities? Sobrino perhaps answers this when he observes that the parable of the Good Samaritan “is concerned with how to respond rightly to God”.\textsuperscript{69} The distinction between, on the one hand, the priest and the Levite, and on the other, the Samaritan, is primarily a religious one, between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, with the clear presupposition being in favour of the religiously orthodox. However, what the story demonstrates is the centrality of orthopraxis as a confirmation of orthodoxy,\textsuperscript{70} for what is important “is to do God’s will, which… consists in going forth in support of victims”.\textsuperscript{71} In other words, at the heart of the Samaritan’s actions is the desire to do God’s will, which enables him to transcend religious and ethnic divides, fear, even perhaps common sense. \textit{Pace} Mrs Thatcher, the parable is not praising his business acumen nor the notion of charitable giving, but rather shows that one’s neighbour is identified, or identifies him- or herself to the

\textsuperscript{66} Sobrino, \textit{Jesus the Liberator}, p.90  See also Jon Sobrino, \textit{Where is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity and Hope}, (trans. Margaret Wilde), Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 2004, p.29, where he speaks of compassion and mercy.

\textsuperscript{67} Sobrino has written extensively on what he calls the “pity” or “mercy” principle. See, for example, Jon Sobrino, “Espiritualidad y Seguimiento de Jesus”, in Sobrino and Ellacuría (eds.), \textit{Mysterium Liberationis}, Vol.II, pp.454-456 and the essay referred to below, “La Iglesia Samaritana y el Principio-Misericordia”. His major treatment of the theme is in Jon Sobrino, \textit{The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross}, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1994 (original 1992). The word “misericórdia” is not easy to translate, since it can mean both “pity” and “mercy”, but perhaps without the somewhat paternalistic overtones which the word “pity” can evoke in English.

\textsuperscript{68} The original quotation is from a television interview given on Jan. 6, 1986, and quoted in \textit{The Times} (London, 12/1/1986). See \textit{The Colombia World of Quotations}, www.bartleby.com/66/62/57762.html

\textsuperscript{69} Sobrino, \textit{Jesus the Liberator}, p.190.

\textsuperscript{70} This is not Sobrino’s description, but my reading of him. On the at times complicated relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxis see Gustavo Gutiérrez, \textit{The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations}, (trans. Matthew O’ Connell), Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 1991, pp.100-105.

\textsuperscript{71} Sobrino, \textit{Jesus the Liberator}, p.190.
extent that we seek, in Sobrino’s words, to “[correspond] to the reality of God”.  

There is a third treatment by Sobrino of this parable which I mention briefly as it leads into the next theme, when he looks, within the context of his thinking on the “mercy principle”, at the “Samaritan” church. Sobrino first describes what he sees as the point of the parable, the description of the perfect or complete human being (“el ser humano cabal”). Such a person is one who “interiorises in the depths of their being the suffering of the other (sufrimiento ajeno) – in the parable unjustly inflicted punishment – in such a way that it becomes a part of them and the internal, primary and ultimate principle of their acting”.

This response on an individual level, the re-action which has become so internalised as to become also first action, is something which Sobrino argues should exist on a larger level, namely that of the church. Moreover, the greatest wound to which the church is called to respond is that of poverty, which only a church which is de-centred can manage. The call of the church to be a church of the poor is something I return to shortly.

To sum up this section, I turn to the words of the Franciscan biblical scholar, Leslie Hoppe, who concludes his work on the poor in the Bible with these thoughts:

> the biblical tradition finds the experience of the poor an apt metaphor for the universal need for salvation. The poor come to depend upon God because they cannot depend upon themselves, since most often they are powerless to change their situation. They cannot depend on the wealthy because it is the wealthy who create and maintain their poverty. The poor have only one choice and that is to depend upon God…. Though the Bible uses the cries of the poor to speak about the universal human need of God, it does not confer an aura of holiness around the poor nor does it ever denigrate the need to overcome the forces that create and sustain injustice and oppression.

The tension between the view of the poor as those who are especially close to God and the recognition that their poverty is essentially an outcome of evil is one that underlies much of liberation theology’s reflection on the biblical evidence. Thus there is a constant reiteraion of God’s choice of the poor, his option for the poor, and the poor are thus exalted and given a

---

72 Ibid., p.190
74 Sobrino, “La Iglesia Samaritana” section 1.2 La misericordia según Jesús, paragraph a)
75 Ibid.
76 Sobrino, “La Iglesia Samaritana”, 2.1 Una Iglesia des-centrada por la misericordia and 2.2 La historización de los clamores y de la misericordia
77 Hoppe, Being Poor, p.176
special status. On the other hand, there is a view of the poor as those who need help, who are “victims”, and thus require help and assistance from the “non-poor”. The problem that remains is why and how these “non-poor” act, a question that Sobrino and Gutiérrez have both tried to address.

1.1.1.3 The Poor Today
The poor of today are, for liberation theology, closely related to the poor of the Bible. The very brief survey in the previous paragraphs shows how liberation theology has made use of the Bible to justify its collocation of the poor as its primary *locus theologicus*. Its interest is primarily in what the Bible has to say for the poor of Latin America today. Here I want to look at how liberation theologians have sought to describe and name these people today.

It is recognised that definitions of poverty, and thus of the poor, are difficult, at least in terms of absolute standards. However, “to make international comparisons, [poverty] is conventionally measured by the proportion of people with incomes (on a household basis adjusted for family size) which are less than half the country’s median income.” Even this, however, does no more than offer a rough and ready guide for comparing levels of poverty between countries. It does not, for example, reflect on the adequacy of the median income of a country for meeting basic needs, nor does it entirely eliminate problems created by the inequality of wealth distribution. Thus, despite the statistics which are

---

78 That this diversity is present in the Bible itself is underlined by Hoppe, *Being Poor*, p.1. Indeed, the task he sets himself is to contextualise the readings of the poor: “it makes quite a bit of difference whether the poor are spoken of by the wealthy or the poor themselves... it is important to know what was being said to whom and by whom.”


80 I remember once showing photographs of a very poor housing estate in Manchester, where I had lived, to a group in Brazil. Their response was that this did not look anything like poverty to them, because the people had flats to live in. Poverty is always relative to wealth.


82 The median income is, to make it clear, not the same as the mean income, and thus takes much more into account the inequality of wealth distribution. Nevertheless, it is unable of itself to show if the median
sometimes deployed, liberation theology’s picture of the poor tends to be rather impressionistic than strictly economic or social.

What this tends to mean is that the understanding of the poor is in effect a secondary activity, a reflection on a pastoral practice, a point which Leonardo Boff makes in his book *When Theology Listens to the Poor*. That is to say, there is no pre-determined concept of poverty which is applied to a particular situation, and all attempts at categorisation are to that extent *post hoc*. Thus, poverty is to be condemned, and to be seen as the result of unjust and deliberate structures and policies, whilst the poor, those who are affected by this poverty, are in Latin America the people of God. Boff claims that to speak of the church as the people of God “means the Church of the poor, understanding *poor* in its direct, empirical sense”.

---

83 In itself, this is neither inaccurate nor unreasonable. A good example can be found in Julio de Santa Ana, *Towards a Church of the Poor: The Work of an Ecumenical Group on the Church and the Poor*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 1981 (originally published by WCC, Geneva, 1979), pp.1-33, with many stories of poor people from around the world. The poor, as any other person or group of people, remain indefinable. The problem occurs if the apparent clarity of theoretical work, in liberation theology for example, leads to the impression that the term has a clear and univocal meaning which can be used to include or exclude people.

84 The most rigorous attempt by a Brazilian social scientist to respond to the question of who the poor are is probably that of Sonia Rocha, *Pobreza no Brasil: Afinal, de que se trata?*, Rio de Janeiro, FGV, 2005. The title loosely translates into English as “Poverty in Brazil. Just what are we talking about?”. Rocha offers a detailed critique of the various methods which have been used to define poverty in Brazil, most of which have been income-based. She argues, however, that income must be taken per family, not per person, to give a truer picture – a single person on a minimum salary has more money than a family of four trying to live on the same amount. See also Sonia Rocha, “Pobreza no Brasil: O que mudou nos últimos 30 anos?”, a paper delivered at a Mini-Forum in honour of 40 years of IPEA in September 2004, available online at www.assistenciasocial.rj.gov.br/downloads/biblioteca/Pobreza%20no%20Brasil_O%20que%20mudou%20nos%20últimos%2030%20anos.pdf (accessed 26/10/06). Joining Rocha in questioning income as a sole source for defining poverty are Ricardo Paes de Barros, Mirela de Carvalho, Samuel Franco, “Pobreza Multidimensional no Brasil”, Texto para discussão 1227, October 2006, Rio de Janeiro, available at http://www.ipea.gov.br/sites/000/2/publicacoes/tds/td_1227.pdf (accessed 26/10/06). IPEA is the Insitute for Applied Economic Research attached to the Brazilian Ministry of Planning, Budgetting and Implementation (essentially the Ministry of Development). Paes de Barros, de Carvalho and Franco argue that a number of factors must be taken into account when diagnosing poverty, namely vulnerability, access to knowledge, access to work, disposable income, child development and living conditions. The ways in which these are aggregated enables distinctions and comparisons to be made between not only regions but even between and within families, thus offering in their view a much more nuanced reading of the nature of poverty. See also Marcio Pochmann, an economist from the State University of Campinas in Brazil who has written extensively on the problems of income distribution in Brazil, for example, “Gasto social, o nível de emprego e a desigualdade da renda do trabalho no Brasil” in João Sicsú, (Ed.), *Arrecadação (de onde vem?) e gastos públicos (para onde vão?)*, São Paulo, Boitempo, 2007, pp.69-77 and on a similar theme, Rudi Rocha and André Urani, “Distribuição de Renda no Brasil: um Ensaio sobre uma Desigualdade Desconhecida”, www.anpec.org.br/encontro2005/artigos/A05A151.pdf (accessed 26/10/06), which demonstrates just how little richer Brazilians appreciate or are aware of the level of poverty in the country.

85 Leonardo Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, p.8-13

86 Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, p. 20. What precisely this direct empirical sense is, however, he does not state.
As with his reading of the Good Samaritan, Gutiérrez has developed in his reflection on who the poor are. He himself acknowledges this in his Introduction to the revised version of *Theology of Liberation*. He writes:

… the increasingly numerous commitments being made to the poor have given us a better understanding of how complex their world is. For myself, this has been the most important (and even crushing) experience of these past years. The world of the poor is a universe in which the socio-economic aspect is basic but not all-inclusive. In the final analysis, poverty means death….. At the same time, it is important to realise that being poor is a way of living, thinking, loving, praying, believing, and hoping, spending leisure time, and struggling for a livelihood.87

The poor are often already broken down into different groups in his writings – exploited classes, despised ethnic groups, marginalised cultures.88 The poor are those who are made poor by the social structures of Latin America and the world.89 Perhaps most controversially, they are ones who are being transformed into agents of their own history.90

The theme has proved controversial because it is very hard to say in what sense it is true. One of those who was responsible for introducing the idea, the Brazilian Hugo Assmann, reflected on the topic some years later and recognised that his earlier optimism in speaking of the poor as “*sujeto histórico*”91 was surely misplaced and had no support from the scriptures.92 Moreover, although it aims at the liberation of the poor from the poverty which brings death, Assmann regards it as being destructive, not least because it fails to take seriously the point which Gutiérrez made in the quotation above, that being poor is also to do with life.

87 Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, p.xxi
88 See for example Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, p.37, p.190. To some extent, this may mark part of the turn to culture, which has been so noticeable in theology over the past twenty-five years or so. But it is also true to say that an understanding of the reality of life in Latin America is perhaps best found through literature, poetry, art, cinema, and so on.
91 Hugo Assmann, “Apuntes sobre el tema del sujeto” in José Duque (ed.), *Perfiles Teológicos para un Nuevo Milenio*, San José, Costa Rica, DEI, 2004 (second edition), pp.115-146. He notes that “*sujeto*” is a difficult word to translate into other European languages such as English. Assmann also draws attention to the interventions of Juan Luis Segundo on this matter, noting his critique of the idea. See pp.120-121. The term is in origin a Marxist one.
92 Here it is worth recalling what we saw in the Old Testament, where the poor are nearly always presented as those in need of the protection of God, mediated by those in power. There is no sign of the poor as subject. Arguably this is more present in the New Testament, certainly in Kruger’s reading of the Letter to James. See Kruger, *Pobres y Ricos*, pp.325-330. The poor, we might say, are subjects because God has chosen them to be subjects.
However, it would be fair to remark that for Gutiérrez the argument is perhaps more to counter the opposite reality, in which the poor are made non-persons. Thus repeatedly Gutiérrez notes that the task of liberation theology is not, as it is for Western political theology, to dialogue with unbelief, but to treat of the problem of those whom the dominant socio-economic setting deems to be non-persons, people with no value.\footnote{See Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, p.57. “In Latin America the challenge does not come first and foremost from the non-believer…. It comes from the non-person. It comes from the person whom the prevailing social order refuses to recognise as a person” See also pp.92-93. Gutiérrez is on dangerous ground here, so it is important to stress that he is not endorsing this view. However, even in using the language, he does open himself up to the charge that he is failing to take sufficiently seriously the otherness of the other. This other is always and irreducibly a person, and precisely as such challenges each one of us. This criticism of Gutiérrez’s expression was made by Frei Clodovis Boff OSM in a conversation I had with him in Curitiba on July 19th 2008. Nevertheless, cf. David Tracy, “The Christian Option for the Poor” in Daniel Groody (ed.), *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, pp.119-131, who says the claim that the theological problem of today is that of “those thought to be non-persons by the reigning elites… strikes me as exactly right” (p.119)\footnote{Gutiérrez, *Hablar de Dios desde el sufrimiento del inocente*, p.184-5} In his book on Job, he notes that for Latin Americans the question is not how to do theology after Auschwitz, but how to do theology in the killing fields of Peru.\footnote{Gutiérrez, *Hablar de Dios desde el sufrimiento del inocente*, p.184-5} In other words, what is at stake is finding a way to counteract the negation of identity to the poor by offering them an identity and a sense of worth that is dependent on themselves and not on some outside factor.

It seems to me that this is what he is aiming at when he writes on the idea of love of neighbour in one of the essays collected in the book *The Power of the Poor in History*. Here he has the following to say:

> Love of one’s neighbour is an essential component of Christian existence. But as long as I define my neighbour as the person next door, the one I meet on my way, the one who comes to me for help, my world will remain the same… But if, on the contrary, I define neighbour as the one whose way I take, the person afar off whom I approach, if I define my neighbour as the one I must go out to look for, on the highways and byways, in the factories and slums, on farms and in the mines – then my world changes. This is what is happening with the “option for the poor”, for in the gospel it is the poor person who is the neighbour par excellence..\footnote{Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, p.44}

Love of neighbour is no longer an option which I am free to take or not, but a command which I must accede to or, in disobeying it, deny myself as well as the other who commands.\footnote{This is the language of Levinas, which I examine in much more detail in Chapter 3.} And this other, this poor person, is no longer one who is accommodated to my needs and desires, but one who pulls me into his or her world, and forces me to take decisions which affect not only me, but them too. Arguably, in this quotation, there is still room for me to control this other. So, I decide whom to come face to face with, I know where to find this other, I know what I must do to help them, even before I encounter them. Nevertheless, it is also possible to understand it as
saying that my search is never for something entirely unknown, and that when I find this person who presents him- or herself to me as neighbour, I am allowing them to be in charge of their own history.97

Finally in this section, I turn to the work of Clodovis Boff. In his contribution on the methodology of liberation theology in *Mysterium Liberationis*, he has a section entitled “For an amplification of the concept of the poor”.98 In this section Boff has a delicate balancing act to perform, since he wants both to assert the importance of the socio-economic understanding of poverty and the poor, and the need for a socio-analytic mediation99, whilst at the same time wanting to speak of a wider understanding of oppression and allowing the poor to contribute to their own self-description.

Thus he begins by noting that it is impossible to restrict definitions of oppression to the socio-economic level, however basic that might be.100 Instead, other oppressions, to do with race, ethnicity, gender, generation, must be taken into account as well, in order to overcome any exclusively class-based interpretation of the concept of the poor.101 However, Boff still wants to claim that the poor are, so to speak, the underlying category on which the others are based – he speaks of the socio-economically poor as the “infrastructural [or base] expression of the process of oppression”, whilst “[t]he other types represent superstructural expressions of oppression”.102 Thus, whilst acknowledging the importance of other forms of oppression, and the effect they have on poverty, he wishes to retain the socio-economic aspect as prime and in some sense prior.

Much the same is true when it comes to the discussion of the importance of the socio-analytic mediation, by which, to sum up very briefly, Boff means the use of the social sciences as the first step for theological reflection on the political.103 This is, he notes, useful, but can only offer a scientific approximation of the reality of poverty. It is also necessary to listen to what the poor mean when they talk about poverty and about being poor. The

---

97 There will be a much more detailed discussion of the concept of the Other in Chapter 3. Here I simply want to draw attention to the way in which it is used by writers in liberation theology.

98 Clodovis Boff, “Epistemología y Método de la Teología de la Liberación”, p.104, “Para ampliar la concepción del pobre”.

99 I look in much more detail at this in Chapter 4.

100 Boff, “Epistemología y Método”, p.104 “It is impossible to remain at the purely socio-economic aspect of oppression, that is, the aspect “poor”, however fundamental and ‘determinative’ it may be”.


102 *Ibid.*, p.105 “el pobre socio-económico es la expresión infraestructural del proceso de opresión. Los otros tipos representan expresiones superestructurales de la opresión...” Boff’s Marxist-inspired vocabulary means that when he refers to the infrastructural he is really talking about the base. Thus, the socio-economic aspect is what gives meaning to the other forms of oppression. As he puts it, it is one thing to talk of a black taxi driver and another to talk of a black football star, or of a woman employed as a domestic help or a woman who is First Lady of a country (See p.105).

103 I treat this mediation in much more detail in Chapter 4.1.2.1
distinction between the economist and the poor person when they talk, for example, about work, is as follows:

For the latter [the economist] it is mostly a simple category or a statistical calculation, while for the people work connotes drama, anguish, dignity, security, exploitation, exhaustion, life; in sum, a whole series of complex and even contradictory perceptions.\(^{104}\)

He goes on to note that the same holds true for understandings of what it is to be poor. “When the people say “poor”, they say dependency, weakness, helplessness, anonymity, being despised, humiliation”.\(^{105}\) Thus, he notes, the poor do not tend to call themselves poor.

He concludes by saying that for Christians the poor are all this and more, for in the poor the Christian sees “the image of the disfigured God, the Son of God made into a suffering and rejected servant, the memory of the Nazarene, poor and persecuted, the sacrament of the Lord and judge of history”.\(^{106}\) Thus, the poor gain, for Boff, an eschatological dimension, since they reveal or open the way to the infinity of God. However correct this may be, it should be noted that in this last step Boff moves beyond what he himself had just recommended, that liberation theology should listen to the poor as they evaluate themselves and voice their own self-understanding. In his “Christian” reading of the poor he assumes that the poor are a discretely known reality, and thus capable of the revelatory capabilities he assigns to them.\(^{107}\) However, he does also therefore assume that they are iconic.

In this section, then, it has become clear that, whilst liberation theology is able to assert the centrality of the poor in its methodology, and to affirm that they are primarily the socio-economic poor, it is either unable or sees no need to define more precisely its concept of the poor. Even the most powerful descriptions of the poor in liberation theology are, perhaps necessarily, impressionistic. This, however, may be taken to indicate that such descriptions come from the challenges raised by the encounter with the poor, who are encountered precisely as people, with all the complexities, contradictions, and possibilities inherent in human existence.

A form of impressionistic discourse is at the heart of Puebla’s important attempt to give some content and context to its discussion of the poor. Its use of the image of “faces” of the poor\(^{108}\) is something which cannot help but remind us of Levinas’ attachment to the importance of the “face” of the Other, a topic to which I turn in Chapter 3. The theme is picked up also in

---

\(^{104}\) Boff, “Epistemologia y Metodo”, p.106

\(^{105}\) Ibid., p.106

\(^{106}\) Ibid., p.106

\(^{107}\) As we will see later in Chapter 4, Boff himself is not unaware of this danger.

\(^{108}\) Puebla 31-39
Aparecida 65 and 402. Meanwhile, Jon Sobrino has recently given a moving plea for the continued centrality of the poor in liberation theology:

The poor are those who do not take for granted, as something normal, being alive, which is why I am not one of them, because I do take life for granted. The poor are those who have almost all the powers of this world against them... The poor are those who have no name... The poor are, if I might say something that sounds crazy, those with no diaries: they have no idea what 7/10 is, even if they know what 9/11 is. 7/10 is 7th October, the day on which the democracies bombed Afghanistan as a response to 9/11. Without name and without a diary the poor have no existence. They are not. With that, they ask me what word I say and I do not say, so that they may be. But still the poor are. In them shines a great mystery: their “primordial sanctity”. And with fear and trembling I have written “extra pauperes nulla salus est”. They bring salvation”. 109

At the praxic level at which liberation theology tends to operate, this non-definition of the poor is both reasonable and understandable. The problem in Latin America is hardly one of deciding who the poor are, and the urgency of the task is one which militates against over-theorising. However, in terms of its theoretical work, liberation theology then finds itself at a disadvantage, for it must make statements about a group that is at best amorphous. To give a simple example, the rural and the urban poor are not the same, and liberation for one is not necessarily liberation for the other. So, liberation theologians have realised that in order to capture the richness and variety of those whom they encounter, they need to be more nuanced in their discussions. In the following sections I turn to some of the different sub-categorisations of the category poor that are commonly used in liberation theology.

1.1.2 The God of the Poor111

In the first place, the theology of liberation is precisely a theology – for Gutiérrez, indeed, more specifically a soteriology.112 Thus, before anything

---

109 See Jon Sobrino, Epilogue in José Maria Vigil (ed), Bajar de la Cruz a los Pobres: Cristología de la Liberación, EATWOT, digital publication, version 2.0, May 2007, pp. 291-300, here especially p.293. This book is in response to the rather strange condemnation of Sobrino’s Christology by the Vatican. See also here Aparecida §62, especially for the point about the diary. Sobrino has also recently published a collection of essays entitled No Salvation outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays, Maryknoll, Orbis, 2008

110 Cf., for example, Sobrino, The True Church and the Poor, p.49: “The “other” to which Jesus directs his practice of love is a collectivity that is well defined in sociological terms: the world of the poor”. This view of the poor as class, collective, group, is found throughout the writings of liberation theologians.

111 The title of this sub-section reflects that of Araya’s book, but it is a commonplace among liberation theologians.

112 So, for example, the sub-title of A Theology of Liberation is “History, Politics and Salvation”. See chapter 9, Liberation and Salvation. Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff have also written extensively on this topic, especially their book Salvation and Liberation, (trans. Robert Barr), Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 1984.
else, it seeks to articulate something about God. But because of its insistence on the poor as the central locus of theology, the God the theologians speak of is one who is involved always with the poor.

I begin by looking at Victorio Araya, a Methodist writer based in Costa Rica, who in his book The God of the Poor addresses first the topic of the continuing manifestation of the Mystery of God. The Transcendent and wholly Other God is also a God who is constantly close to his people. This closeness is not something that has happened only in the past, but it continues to occur, and moreover “[p]aradoxically, it is in wretchedness and oppression that the locus of access to God is to be sought”.

God is present, reveals himself most clearly, where there is suffering. In other words, God is discovered or reveals himself in and through the lives of the poor. Admittedly, this rather seems to downplay the presence of God in times of joy, though presumably Araya could argue that the God who is encountered in times of suffering is the God who raised Jesus to life, precisely and radiantly the God of Life.

It is not surprising that liberation theology should reflect one of the central claims of Christianity, that “in Jesus of Nazareth the God who liberates has become incarnate in human nature”. What is important here is not just the fact of the Incarnation in general, but the specificity of it, the fact that God in Jesus has become incarnate in the world of the poor. To this end Araya cites Jon Sobrino: “Jesus has not become incarnate in just any world, but in the world of the poor… He has defended not just any cause, but the cause of the poor. Not just any lot has fallen to him, but the lot of the poor.”

This choice, this option for the concrete particularity of the world of the poor, is one which is continued in and through the presence of the Spirit.

---

113 Elsewhere, Gutiérrez says: “From the viewpoint of theological reflection, the challenge posed by Latin America is to find a language about God that will spring from the situation and the suffering created by the unjust poverty in which the vast majority live (despised races, exploited social classes, marginalized cultures, discrimination against women).”, Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Theology and the Social Sciences”, in id., The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations, (trans. Matthew O’Connell), Maryknoll, Orbis, 1990, pp.53-84, here p.56

114 Araya, God of the Poor, pp.46-47. He refers to Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, pp.106 ff., (note that the page numbers of references to Gutiérrez in the English translation of Araya’s book do not correspond with the English translation of Gutiérrez’s book), and to Sobrino, The True Church and the Poor, p.141. See also Pixley and Boff, The Bible, the Church and the Poor, p.18

115 Araya, God of the Poor, p.48

116 Unlike Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, better known by its opening words Gaudium et Spes. Here joy and hope come first, and only then luctus et angor, the grief and anxieties, especially of the poor (GS 1).

117 Araya, God of the Poor, p.49


119 Araya, God of the Poor, p.50. The classic work on the Holy Spirit from the perspective of liberation theology is José Comblin, O Espírito Santo e a Libertação, Petrópolis, Vozes, 1988
Related to this option for the poor which God manifests in the incarnation is the notion of solidarity, the paradoxical presence of the *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God.\textsuperscript{120} For Araya, following here especially Gutiérrez, this “hidden presence” of God is manifest in a variety of ways. God is encountered in the poor, concealing in them “the visage and the action of the godhead”.\textsuperscript{121} The God who is thus encountered reveals himself to be a partial God. This, as Jon Sobrino notes, is a scandal\textsuperscript{122} – very much in the original sense that Paul uses the word in 1 Cor 1:23, a stumbling block for faith. Sobrino himself carries his reflection on the nature of God further in his Christology when he considers the relationship of Jesus to the Father. Here he stresses the importance of the *Dios Menor*, the lesser God and suggests that there is “a positive theology in Jesus, since he affirms that God is Father and dares to proclaim that the final reality of history is the saving approach of God to the poor, the triumph of the victim over the executioners…”\textsuperscript{123}

God’s love is understood to be inescapably partisan. This is manifest in the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-11 and especially in contrast to the curses in Lk 6:20-26), in Jesus’ Nazareth Manifesto (Lk 4:16-21) and the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom to the poor (Mt 11:6, Lk 7:22-23). This love is essential to who God is, and is not in opposition to the universality of God’s love, but “is the very expression of its universality and transcendence”.\textsuperscript{124} Behind this apparent paradox lies the understanding that God does indeed love everyone, but God’s love is rooted and expressed from a particular standpoint, namely that of the poor.\textsuperscript{125} As a result of this partisan love, God is, and reveals himself to be, in solidarity with human suffering. Araya sees here three key ideas, that God is not indifferent to human suffering, that he is able to suffer because he is love, and that the culmination of God’s solidarity in suffering is the cross of Jesus.\textsuperscript{126} The ultimate result of this loving solidarity is salvation. Araya locates the third way in which the God of the poor manifests himself precisely in God’s salvific plan. Here he concentrates on the liberating God of the Exodus, and especially on the Old Testament image of God as *go’el*, the

\textsuperscript{120} Araya, *God of the Poor*, pp.50-51. I return to this topic from a different perspective in chapter 3, with special reference to the work of Jean-Luc Marion.


\textsuperscript{122} Sobrino, *The True Church*, p.2, also cited in Araya, *God of the Poor*, p.54

\textsuperscript{123} Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p.158 See chapters 5 and 6 for his extended treatment of the question of Jesus’ relationship to the God whom he called Father. Part of this has been criticised by the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in their “Notification on some writings of Fr Jon Sobrino”. See also Araya, *God of the Poor*, pp.54-55 and references to Sobrino contained therein.

\textsuperscript{124} Araya, *God of the Poor*, p.57

\textsuperscript{125} See, for example, Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, pp.82-84, or Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, pp.13-14

\textsuperscript{126} Araya, *God of the Poor*, pp.59 ff.
redeemer, or rescuer and protector of the poor, and on the understanding of God as the God of life, a topic to which I turn in the next chapter. Thus, to sum up briefly this part, liberation theology sees the poor as special recipients of God’s favour. As Gustavo Gutiérrez puts it, “the poor person is preferred, not because he or she is morally or religiously better than other people, but because God is God, on whom no one places conditions (cf. Judith 8:11-18) and for whom ‘the last will be first’”. Thus, similarly to the way Augustine strove to defend the idea of God’s gratuitous goodness against claims that salvation could be gained through human merit, liberation theology affirms that God’s preferential, though never exclusive, love for the poor is not connected with anything they have done, but solely with God’s own free and sovereign desire to manifest his love partially. If there is an articulus stantis aut cadentis for the theology of liberation, this assertion may well be it. If God does not side with or show any special love for the poor, then there is no theological reason for anyone else to do so.

1.1.3 The Poor as Sacrament of God
Given the claims made about God’s preferential love for the poor, the poor can then be seen as those who reveal God’s presence, God’s reality, in a particular way. In this sense, they are described by Clodovis Boff as “a sacrament of God”. For Boff, indeed, this claim is essentially to do with the relationship between the poor and God. Even more specifically than seeing the poor as a sacrament of God, Boff draws on Vatican II to suggest that the poor are the sacrament (or image) of Christ. More than this, the

127 Ibid., pp.67-75
129 Luíz Carlos Susin and Érico João Hammes, in their article “A Teologia da Libertação e a Questão de Seus Fundamentos: Em Debate com Clodovis Boff”, REB 68/270 (2008), pp.277-299, note: “this recognition [that God reveals himself in the poor] and this conversion to the privileged place of the poor without grace and without merit is articulum stantis vel cadentis” (p.295).
130 Pixley and Boff, The Bible, the Church and the Poor, chapter V, The Poor, Sacrament of God, p.109. See also Juan Fernando López SJ, Pobres Sacramentos?! Os Sacramentos no Dinamismo do Seguimento de Jesus Presente no Pobre, São Paulo, Paulinas, 1995, p.21 “The poor are sacraments of Christ”. This is not a unique claim of liberation theology. The Orthodox scholar Emmanuel Clapsis has written: “…in Christian tradition we have three distinct but equally important and inseparable sacramental ways of being in communion in God: the Word of God, the Divine Liturgy, and the mystery of the poor brethren”. Emmanuel Clapsis, “Wealth and Poverty in Christian Tradition”, in George P. Liacopulos (ed.), Church and Society: Orthodox Christian Perspectives, Past Experiences and Modern Challenges (Studies in Honor of Rev. Dr. Demetrios J. Constantelos, Boston, Massachusetts, Somerset Hall Press, 2007, pp.87-107, here p.105
131 Pixley and Boff, The Bible, the Church and the Poor, p.107
132 Lumen Gentium 8, the Latin text reads “similiter Ecclesia omnes infirmitate humana afflictos amore circumdat, imo in pauperibus et patientibus imaginem Fundatoris sui pauperis et patientis agnoscit, eorum inopiam sublevare satagit, et Christo in eis inservire intendit” and the English translation “Similarly, the Church encompasses with love all who are afflicted with human suffering and in the poor and afflicted sees the image of its poor and suffering Founder. It does all it can to relieve their need and in them it
“poor are the living mediation of the Lord, his real expression and not just an intermediary between us and him”. Thus it is that the poor are “the sacrament of Jesus”, “the manifestation and communication of his mystery, the setting for his revelation and dwelling”. The reason why this can be affirmed is, Boff argues, because Jesus was born in poverty. “The poor alone can glory in having the eternal Son of the Father among their relations”. Boff does not want to restrict the meaning of the incarnation to its class dimension. However, it is clear that he uses an incarnational theology to make some large claims, which he does not really go on to develop in the remainder of the chapter, except to say that there is a dialectical relationship between Christ and the poor, so that “[f]aith in the Christ of the Gospels leads to the poor, and commitment to and with the poor leads us into the mystery of Christ.”

It must be noted that Boff does not altogether make clear what he means by sacrament, but given the quotation he uses from *Lumen Gentium* it would be reasonable to say that he stresses the nature of the poor as *imago Christi*. The sacramental is that which manifests in a particular and visible way the presence of God to and for his creation. In this sense, the poor are an icon of Christ. Indeed, the French Canadian Biblical scholar Marc Girard, has used this very phrase. In his work on the poor person as sacrament of God, he writes:

The poor person, an icon – an ultimate image, the most beautiful, the most evocative, the most ’sacramental’ – the poor person becomes nothing less than an icon – living, flesh, blood and light. Icon of Christ. Finally, the poor person is an icon of the invisible God. Normally, figures in icons have a serious face and dark skin. But they are placed on a golden background, shining, symbol of glory and of mystery. In this way, through the obscurity of the figure of the poor person, we glimpse the transparency of God, the dazzling light of the invisible.

In his contribution to *Mysterium Liberationis* on sacraments the Bolivian-based Jesuit Victor Codina also alludes to the sacramental nature of the poor, including reference to the text of Boff which we have just discussed. For Codina, however, the poor are a sort of negative sacrament of the

---

133 Pixley and Boff, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor*, p.113
134 Ibid., p.113
135 Ibid., p.114
136 Ibid., p.116
137 Girard speaks of “le pauvre”, “o pobre” (the poor person in the singular) because, he says, he wants “to emphasise not the phenomenon, but the person of the poor, in all its grandeur and dignity. In this I will stay closer to the Bible.” Marc Girard, *O Pobre: Sacramento de Deus*, (trad. Paulo Ferreira Valério),São Paulo,Paulinas, 1998 (orig. French 1994), p.5
138 Ibid., pp.155-156
Keeping The Window Open

Thus the poor, in as far as they are victims of all that is opposed to the Kingdom of God, are signs of that kingdom or perhaps more precisely of the need for its instauration. They point to the gap between the will of God and the reality of a world marked by sin. Where the sacraments are life-giving, the poor, in their suffering, display the presence of death. To speak of the church as a sacrament of salvation is also linked to the sacramentality of the poor, made explicit through reference to Christ. At the same time, Codina continues, the sacramentality of the church cannot be understood apart from the poor who constitute “the eschatological ‘test’ of all sacramentality”.

Jon Sobrino does not explicitly refer to the poor as a sacrament, but he does refer to them in ways which have sacramental overtones. Thus, he claims “that the Spirit is present in the poor ex opere operato”, which means that “the Spirit manifests itself in the poor and that they are therefore structural channels for finding the truth of the Church and the direction and content of its mission”. Here he is to some extent echoing Codina’s remarks – the poor it is who act as a sort of litmus test for the “authenticity” of the church.

Gustavo Gutiérrez also deals with the sacramentality of the church. Already in A Theology of Liberation he gave some attention to this topic, picking up on the use by Vatican II of the idea of the church as a, indeed the, sacrament of salvation. This means, then, that the church always exists not for itself but for others, since its task is to make visible to all humankind the saving plan and will of God made incarnate in and through its Lord and Saviour and present in the power of the Holy Spirit. To the extent that it does this, it is church, to the extent that it does not, it fails to act as church. He picks up on this point in his essay, “The Truth Shall Set You Free”, where he follows Congar in saying that the church must be

---

140 Ibid., p.281
141 Though interestingly he does note that there are certain things which prevent creatures from being what they should be, sacraments of their creator. See Sobrino, The True Church and the Poor, p.171. Moreover, he notes in Jesus the Liberator, p.21, in discussing Puebla’s treatment of the poor, that “the poor are a sort of sacrament of the presence of Christ”.
142 Jon Sobrino, The True Church and the Poor, p.95. It should be noted that Sobrino is not unaware of the dangers of the ex opere operato phraseology, and devotes the next section of his essay to giving epistemological grounds for this claim, so that it does not fall into a mechanistic concept. What is being stressed here, as we saw above, is the gratuitous solidarity of God with the poor, which has nothing to do with their individual merit or actions.
143 Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, pp.147-148
understood here not simply as institution, but as people of God.\textsuperscript{144} However, although he does say that the “proclamation of the good news to the poor is a sign of the presence of Christ the messiah in human history”,\textsuperscript{145} it is noticeable that he does not seek to make the poor sacramental in any sense,\textsuperscript{146} nor does he specifically link the church, even as people of God, with the poor.

Thus, even if it is not a particularly common way of talking, there is nevertheless the possibility within liberation theology of referring to the poor as sacraments of God, and more specifically as sacraments of Christ. It is interesting that the Final Document of the Fifth General Conference of CELAM in Aparecida brings this out, if from the other side.\textsuperscript{147} This is an important point for what follows, since it allows me to speak of the poor as iconic, at least in the way that Clodovis Boff and Marc Girard present the idea of the sacramentality of the poor. The poor offer a path to, or an insight into God, not because of who they are, as we saw in the previous section, but because of who God is, namely the one who has chosen the poor in a particular way, and has become incarnate as one of them. I return briefly to the notion of sacrament underlying this claim below, but now I wish to turn to a closer examination of the role of the church.

\textbf{1.1.4 The Church and the Poor}

In the context of Latin America where the church, both as institution and building,\textsuperscript{148} plays such an important role, it is perhaps not surprising that it has been very common to speak of the “church of the poor”. The precise origins of the phrase are unclear, but it was certainly used by John XXIII in a radio message just prior to the opening of the Second Vatican Council.\textsuperscript{149} It was an idea that was to be picked up several times in the Council itself, especially amongst some of the Latin American bishops.\textsuperscript{150} It received its


\textsuperscript{145} Gutiérrez, \textit{The Truth Shall Set You Free}, p.148

\textsuperscript{146} Over against this, however, note Gutiérrez, \textit{The Power of the Poor in History}, p.52. “The poor person, the other, becomes the revealer of the Utterly Other”. He immediately goes on to speak of the class membership of the poor and the importance of political engagement, a theme which was at that period (these essays come from the 1970s) still central to his theology.

\textsuperscript{147} Aparecida §32, seeing the suffering of the people in the suffering of Christ.

\textsuperscript{148} I have considered this in more depth elsewhere: Tim Noble, “The Significance of the “Sacred Space” in Two Communities,” \textit{Communio Viatorum} 3/2002, pp.266-290, especially looking at the importance of the church as building in a local community in Brazil.


\textsuperscript{150} This language was not however by any means universal, as Carlos Schickendanz notes (Carlos Schickendanz, “Zeichen der Zeit heute aus lateinamerikanischer Perspektive”, in Peter Hünermann, Bernd Jochen Hilberath, Lieven Boeve (eds.), \textit{Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil und die Zeichen der Zeit Heute}, Freiburg, Herder, 2006, pp.163-180, here pp.163-164. However, there was a group which sought
confirmation in the Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, held in the Colombian city of Medellín from August 26th to September 6th 1968. Neither Medellín, nor Puebla (the Third General Conference, Jan 27th – Feb 13th 1979) use the phrase “the church of the poor”, which was taken up in church documents again, however, by John Paul II. Nevertheless, in their insistence on a church which makes itself poor and acts in solidarity with the poor, the Bishops of Latin America gathered in Medellín and Puebla gave support to theological and pastoral statements about the church of the poor.

With its commitment to transforming a church which for centuries had sided with the rich and powerful, and benefited materially from this association, into a poor church, Medellín made a declaration of solidarity with the poor. In this way, as Jon Sobrino puts it, the church of the poor was seen as a church not just for the poor (an objective genitive), but as truly the church of the poor, (a subjective genitive). For, a “Church for the poor... supposes that the Church is constituted in logical independence of the poor, and then goes on to ask what this Church must do for the poor”. Over against this, “the Church of the poor is... a Church that must be formed on the basis of the poor and that must find in them the principle of its structure, organisation and mission”.

It is worth being clear what Sobrino is claiming here. The poor, he explains, “are the authentic theological source for understanding Christian truth and practice and therefore the constitution of the Church”. In other words, it is only from the standpoint and perspective of the poor that it is even possible to speak about the church, for it is in “the poor we find the primordial conformity with the truth in its evangelical sources”. This last statement is somewhat opaque, but I take Sobrino to be arguing the following. In the poor, the particularly chosen ones of God, we encounter...
Jesus, the Servant Lord, the Way, the Truth, the Life and thus we also encounter the Father. To the extent that the church is of the poor, it is of its head, Jesus, and receives and manifests the gospel truth. Sobrino puts it this way:

The Church of the poor is not automatically the agent of truth and grace because the poor are in it; rather, the poor in the Church are the structural source that assures the Church of being really the agent of truth and justice. In the final analysis I am speaking of what Jesus refers to in Matthew 25 as the place where the Lord is to be found.158

As mentioned above, Sobrino recognises that there needs to be some mechanism for recognising that the church of the poor is indeed the true church. Ultimately, he says, this can only happen from within the church of the poor, from the acknowledgement that the Spirit is at work in this church.159 Sobrino will argue that the authenticity of the church of the poor is demonstrated by the presence of the traditional four “marks” of the church160 manifest in new, living and transforming ways in the church of the poor.161 Thus, “the poor constitute the true Church, and then, once the Church is established, the four marks, concretised in terms of the poor, verify it”.162

The problem which confronts Sobrino is clearly one which confronts much ecclesiological writing. What precisely is the church which is being spoken of? The reason why neither Medellín nor Puebla speak of the church of the poor is because, as bishops, they simply cannot. Indeed, their pronouncements would be pointless if the church was the church of the poor in the sense which Sobrino argues. To the extent that the church can commit itself to solidarity with the poor, can seek to make itself a poor church, it maintains an independence from the poor, at least conceptually. Nevertheless, although this is not Sobrino’s own line of argument, if we follow Boff in seeing in the poor the imago Christi, and we see Christ as Head of the body, the church,163 then in some sense the poor are indeed constitutive of the church, and there is at least a dynamic equivalence between Ecclesia Christi and Ecclesia pauperum.

Ignacio Ellacuría has a somewhat different starting point in his contribution to Mysterium Liberationis. More clearly than Sobrino, he sees the church as the people of God.164 The task of the people of God is to be the historical

---

158 Ibid., p.95
159 Ibid., pp.96-97
160 That is, its unity, sanctity, catholicity and apostolicity.
161 Jon Sobrino, The True Church and the Poor, pp.100-121
162 Ibid., p.122
163 See Ephesians 5:23
Keeping The Window Open

sacrament of salvation – the symbol of God’s salvific desire for the world made manifest.\textsuperscript{165} This salvation has as its historic form liberation, with all the force of the word, including its social, political and economic dimensions,\textsuperscript{166} and thus it is the task of the church to be not simply, or generally, a sacrament of salvation, but more precisely a sacrament of liberation.\textsuperscript{167} The “minister” of this sacrament will be, for Ellacuría, the church of the poor. In something of an aside he notes here that the acknowledgement of the church as a church of the poor, built up from the base, will enable the church to avoid excessive institutionalisation. It is only by being founded on the basis of the poor, who are at the heart of the Kingdom, that the church can remain true to its calling.\textsuperscript{168} Thus, Ellacuría comes to a conclusion which is not so distant to that of Sobrino. He writes:

The Church… must configure itself as the successor of and that which continues the person and work of Jesus. Consequently, the Church of the poor is… a Church in which the poor are its principal subject and its principle of internal structuring; the union of God with humanity, as it occurred in Jesus Christ, is historically a union of a God emptied most fundamentally to the world of the poor.\textsuperscript{169}

It should be noted, however, that though there are points of encounter between Sobrino and Ellacuría, the latter retains a clear conceptual distinction between the church and the poor.

Clodovis Boff also tackles this topic.\textsuperscript{170} He returns to the fact that any consideration of the poor is subsequent to an option for Christ, which must also be the church’s most fundamental option. Thus, he argues strongly that the option for the poor can never be the church’s sole or exclusive option, because to make such an option would be to lose contact with the faith that sustains it.\textsuperscript{171} Thus this option must be inclusive and integral, aiming at the poor in their totality; that is, as part of a socio-economic reality, but also as human beings in relation with God.\textsuperscript{172}

One final point can be made, which attends more to the functional role of the poor as church. Namely, as for example Puebla made clear,\textsuperscript{173} the poor

\textsuperscript{165} Ellacuría, “La Iglesia de los pobres”, pp.128-135
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., pp.136-144
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., pp.143-144
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., p.146
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., p.147 The last part of the quotation in Spanish is “la unión de Dios con los hombres, tal como se da en Jesucristo, es históricamente una unión de un Dios vaciado en su versión primaria al mundo de los pobres”
\textsuperscript{170} Clodovis Boff, The Bible, the Church and the Poor, Chapter VI: The Church of the Poor: The Church of All, (pp.123-138)
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., p.125. This will be important later on in our discussion of Clodovis Boff in Chapter 4, where he constantly returns to this very point.
\textsuperscript{172} Boff, The Bible, the Church and the Poor, p.129
\textsuperscript{173} Puebla Final Document 1:2, (no.1147) in Alfred T. Hennelly (ed.), Liberation Theology: A Documentary History, pp.255-256 “Commitment to the poor and the oppressed and the rise of grassroots communities have helped the church to discover the evangelising potential of the poor.” See also
are not simply objects of the church’s activity (which in practice, *pace* Sobrino, they have tended to be) but agents. In his reflection on the nature of base communities, Álvaro Barreiro notes that the poor of the CEBS do indeed evangelise other poor people, and their oppressors, but that they “are also, and primarily, evangelising the Church”.

The church is not only *semper reformanda*, but also *semper evangelizanda*, if indeed there is a real difference between the two. Gustavo Gutiérrez makes a similar point, also with reference to the CEBs, when he says that “[t]he poor, privileged addressees of the message of the Kingdom, are also its bearers”.

Thus it can be seen that the church of the poor is an important topic for liberation theology, though the idea is neither entirely clear nor entirely free of problems. In particular, the exact relationship of the church and the poor, and the extent to which and sense in which the poor are fundamentally constitutive of the church remain open to question. In the eagerness to make the poor in some sense the sustainer of the church, as sacrament of their own liberation, there is the danger that yet one more form of oppression will actually be added. On the other hand, the centrality of the poor for understanding the church reinforces the idea of the poor as *imago Christi*, as sacrament and image of Christ. Through the encounter with the poor, Christians are enabled to grasp more fully and more clearly what the church is. I now turn to the final part of this first major section, and examine the option for the poor.

### 1.1.5 The Option for the Poor

To conclude this examination of some of the ways in which liberation theology has understood the poor, I turn to one of its principal contributions

---

174 CEBS is the Spanish / Portuguese abbreviation for Base [or: Basic] Ecclesial Communities – *Comunidades eclesiales* [Portuguese: *eclesiais*] *de base*. For a critical reading by a noted liberation theologian of the use of the word “Base” in the Base Ecclesial Communities, see Pedro Trigo, “La Base en las Comunidades Eclesiales de Base”, available online at www.servicioskoinonia.org/relat/264.htm (accessed 2/8/07). Trigo notes that all too often the base is actually created by pastoral agents (clergy or others) who do not so much listen to the poor as instruct them in what they should do and want. Similar points from an anthropological perspective have also been made as I examine later on in this chapter.

175 Barreiro, *Basic Ecclesial Communities*, p.67

176 Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Pobres y Opción Fundamental,” p.321

177 I have here dealt with Roman Catholic theologians. For another, though closely related perspective, see Guillermo Cook, *The Expectation of the Poor: Latin American Base Ecclesial Communities in Protestant Perspective*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1985. In many ways, the CEBs can be seen as a form of Protestantization of the Catholic Church in Latin America, drawing on many of the features of Protestant church life – the believing community, the priesthood of all believers, the centrality of the Scriptures. Clodovis Boff even notes in a reflection in 1997 on the status of CEBs, Clodovis Boff, “A que ponto estão e para onde vão?” in Clodovis Boff et al, *As Comunidades de Base em Questão*, São Paulo, Paulinas, 1997 pp.251-305, that “symbolism is the richness of popular Catholicism. And it is equally the relative poverty of the CEBs” (p.287, though he does note, again in an interesting parallel with Protestantism, that their hymnology is an exception).
to contemporary theological language, the option for the poor.\textsuperscript{178} When the actual phrase was first used is unclear. The form “preferential option for the poor” seems to come from the third General Conference of CELAM in Puebla in 1979.\textsuperscript{179} However, from its earliest writings, liberation theology was clear that God had chosen the poor, and that this choice was constantly being renewed and restated through history. Consequently, as it was a choice of God, it must also be a choice for all Christians.\textsuperscript{180}

It is not my intention here to offer an in-depth analysis of the option for the poor, either in general, or even in liberation theology.\textsuperscript{181} Rather, I want to focus on some of the underlying questions which are raised by the use of the term. Firstly, then, it is important to reflect on the nature of the option. Who opts, and for what?\textsuperscript{182} Secondly, there remains the question of the addressee of the option, namely, the poor, which we have been examining so far in this chapter.

In order to investigate the first question, I turn to José Maria Vigil.\textsuperscript{183} Vigil has returned to this theme frequently over the past twenty years, emphasising the centrality of the option for the poor for liberation theology,

\textsuperscript{178} On the precise meaning(s) of the Spanish phrase \textit{opción por los pobres} (similar things could be said about the Portuguese “opção pelos pobres”), see Marietta Calderón, “\textit{Opción por los pobres – semantische und pragmatische Entwicklungslinien eines Begriff(sfeld)s}”, in Holztrattner (ed.), \textit{Eine vorrangige Option...?}, pp.15-37. Perhaps of special relevance is her discussion of the way the translation of \textit{por} by, in German, \textit{für} (the same would be true with “for” in English) limits the richness of the preposition (see pp.18-21). It is also worth noting that the word “option” can be misleading. Gustavo Gutiérrez notes that, whereas in English it can merely mean a choice between two things, “in Spanish it invokes the sense of commitment”. See Daniel Hartnett SJ, “Remembering the Poor: An Interview with Gustavo Gutiérrez”, originally published in \textit{America} magazine, Feb. 3\textsuperscript{rd} 2003, available online at www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=2755 (accessed 25/9/08).

\textsuperscript{179} Thus Dennis P. McCann, “Option for the Poor: Rethinking a Catholic Tradition”, in Richard John Neuhaus (ed.), \textit{The Preferential Option for the Poor}, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Wm. Eerdmans, 1988, pp.35-52. Donal Dorr in his book \textit{Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching}, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 1983, does not give any information about the genesis of the terminology. In the interview mentioned in the previous note, Gustavo Gutiérrez said that the “precise term was born sometime between the Latin American Bishops’ Conferences in Medellín (1968) and in Puebla (1979).” See Hartnett “Remembering the Poor: An Interview with Gustavo Gutiérrez”.

\textsuperscript{180} The insistence on solidarity with the poor is already present in Gutiérrez’s \textit{Theology of Liberation}, for example.

\textsuperscript{181} See the Aparecida Final Document, 8.3 The Preferential Option for the Poor and Excluded, §§391-398, for the re-affirmation of the centrality of the option for the poor.

\textsuperscript{182} See on this also the important discussion by Elina Vuola, “The Option for the Poor and the Exclusion of Women”, in Rieger (ed.), \textit{Opting for the Margins}, pp.103-126, especially here pp.112-116. Her strictures against liberation theology are for its failure to take the “the option for concrete women” (p.122), who the official church has often condemned to lives of suffering because of its ethical approach. However, I would suggest that Burdick’s reading in \textit{Legacies of Liberation}, discussed below, shows that at least liberation theology discourse has been adopted by women in Brazil to question the official position in much the way that Vuola urges.

\textsuperscript{183} Vigil, a Claretian priest, was born in Spain in 1946. He lived for thirteen years in Nicaragua and now lives in Panama, where he edits the \textit{Agenda Latinoamericana}. He is also one of the founders of the website servicioskoinonia.org, a portal for much on liberation theology as well as the ReLat series of articles. He has written extensively on the theme of the option for the poor.
indeed for theology in general. In an article written in the mid-1990s, Vigil was asked to address the question “*Que queda de la opción por los pobres?*” – “What remains of the option for the poor?” Writing from a world marked by the end of so-called “real” socialism and the electoral defeat of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and the apparent global triumph of capitalism, Vigil sets himself the task of examining whether there actually is any more an option for the poor, and if it makes any sense to continue using the term. Is it, he asks, any longer possible to speak of the people as the subject of their own history? He begins to answer this question with a critical look at Nicaragua, and the responses to the defeat of the Sandinista government in the 1990 elections. He quotes a review of a novel, *Tu Fantasma, Julián* by Mónica Zalaquett, the wife of the former head of Intelligence for the Sandinistas. The review was written by another well-known Nicaraguan writer, Gioconda Belli. Belli writes:

> The ghost of Julián is the ghost of what they and we have done to Nicaragua, to the peasants, to the innocent beings. It is the ghost of our own incapacity as Nicaraguans, as supposed leaders and politicians, to put the people and their sufferings ahead of ideas, ahead of plans and pride… What is of value in this book is the act of recognising how the political classes of this country, whatever party we belong to, have been incapable of realising adequately the pain we have caused to men and women who have paid with their blood the price of our ideas.

Although I cannot comment on the appropriateness of this critique to events in Nicaragua, it seems to me that Belli’s self-analysis is of importance, for it points to one of the problems always inherent in anything like an option for the poor, that the option and the one who opts can become more dominant than the addressee of the option. However, Vigil does not see the review this way. For him, it is an attempt to forget or re-

---

184 Thus, for example, he writes: “the theology of the option for the poor, in itself, remains “firm and irrevocable”, to such an extent that it has become the major contribution of the Latin American Church to the universal body (*conjunto universal*) of the Churches”. José Maria Vigil, “Opção pelos pobres e trabalho da teologia” (trans. from Spanish by José Alfonso Beraldin), in Luiz Carlos Susin (ed.), *Sarça Ardente: Teologia na América Latina. Prospectivas*, São Paulo, SOTER /Paulinas, 2000, pp.297-307, here p.297
185 José Maria Vigil, “*Que queda de la opción por los pobres?*”, available online at www.servicioskoinonia.org/relat/006.htm (accessed 2/8/07). All references, unless otherwise noted, are to the Internet version of this article, and will be given according to the headings used by Vigil. A printed version of this article can be found in Portuguese under the title, “O que fica da Opção pelos Pobres”, in *PerspTeol* 26 (1994), pp.187-212
186 Vigil, “*Que queda…?*”, “Puede el pueblo ser sujeto de su historia?”, section 1.1, Partiendo de la realidad: Los hechos, en titulares.
189 Quoted in Vigil, “*Que queda…?*”, 1.1, sub-section entitled “la segunda derrota”.
write the past, and shows the “bourgeois elite” abandoning the poor now that this option no longer seems promising. He calls it the second defeat, worse than the first. The latter remained exterior whilst this second one kills the soul. He sees this “second defeat” realised in what he describes as a “postmodernism a la latino-américaine”, an abandonment of hope in great Causes, and a taking refuge in a fragmented, individualist world, enjoying what can be enjoyed. Moreover, as a result of this giving up of hope which Vigil sees as affecting the churches too, many of those who struggled within the churches have left, disillusioned with what the church now brings in terms of commitment to the poor. Indeed, it is not necessarily that they have left, but that they have been driven out.

Vigil then turns to an analysis of the alleged self-evident facts such as the triumph of capitalism, and the inviability of the “popular” project. To the first, he responds that there are precious few signs of the actual triumph of capitalism, and to the second, he notes that it is not the project itself which has shown itself unviable, but that it has been made unviable. “But the truth is not that it is unviable, but that someone makes it unviable. The impossibility is not intrinsic but due to circumstances, not inevitable, but willed”. It is perhaps not surprising that this leads him to consider whether or not the people (the poor) can be subject of their own history. Essentially, what Vigil presents here is a common liberation theology argument. The poor are not poor because of their own indigence or through their own fault, or even because of destiny or misfortune. The poor are poor because they have been impoverished, made poor.

---

190 Cf., the treatment below of utopias in Chapter 2. This is the utopian reason which Hinkelammert will criticise.

191 See section 1.1, Posmodernismo a lo latinoamericano and La deserción de los militantes cristianos

192 It seems to me that there is no really good simple translation of “popular” in English. As used here in Spanish (and Portuguese) it is the adjectival form referring to the “pueblo”, the “people”. This word is itself defined by Pedro Trigo as being used “not in the general sense which [the word] has in, for example, English, but in the precise sense of those from below - los de abajo”. See Pedro Trigo, “La Base en Las Comunidades de Base”, section 1.1. For this reason, in this sense I use popular inside speech marks. Hans de Wit, Leerlingen van de Armen, p.42, offers the following definition of “people” (volk) in liberation theology, which seems to me accurate, at least in the period of which he writes (up to the beginning of the 1990s. He notes that the use of the concept of volk “refers to the poor who have become conscious of the fact that their situation stems from exploitation and oppression; they are active Christians and participate in base communities”.

193 On the failure of the project of liberation theology, see Ivan Petrella, The Future of Liberation Theology.

194 Vigil, “Que queda...?”, 1.2, sub-section, “Era realmente ‘inviabile’ el proyecto popular?”

195 Just to give one example from elsewhere, see Gutiérrez, The Power of the Poor in History, p.65 “We shall not have our quantum theological leap until the oppressed themselves theologise, until “the others” themselves personally reflect on their hope of a total liberation in Christ.”

196 See on this Donal Dorr, Option for the Poor, pp. 239-244 and Gutiérrez, The Power of the Poor in History, p.137
made by Clodovis Boff among others,197 in the first place, theological or theologal.198 This, then, for Vigil, is the most profound answer to the question as to who does the opting. It is God. “The Option for the Poor is a principle of which we are already clear that it belongs essentially to the deepest depths of Christianity because it belongs to the deepest depths of the being of God”.199

Although Clodovis Boff also agrees with this, an important difference between him and Vigil should be noted here. Vigil gives the impression that the option for the poor is foundational in Christian faith and life. Boff, on the other hand, is clear that it is always derivative, based on “an earlier option: their option for Jesus Christ”.200

Vigil would presumably agree to some extent with this, but he also wants to argue that it is a strategic option. That is to say, at determined times committed Christians - the second group he sees as making the option - have sought to exercise it through adoption of specific “ideological-sociopolitical mediations”. This allows him to say that the fundamental (theologal) option remains inviolate, even if the way in which it is made in practice differs. Thus it is possible to explain changes which have clearly occurred in the way the option for the poor has been understood. This would seem to involve, however, a clear distinction between motivation and realisation.

Vigil seems to acknowledge this when he suggests that the distinction of levels should not lead to their separation. Here he tries to rescue the unity of the option.201 The theologal needs to act as the guiding force for the strategic, so it must be recognised that failures on the strategic level are not fatal for the theologal level. The problem which is unresolved is how to discern the relationship between the God who opts for the poor and the actual attempts of committed Christians to live out this option in given socio-political circumstances.

So far, Vigil has not argued that the poor themselves are those who make the option for the poor. He seeks to do this by asking if the option for the poor includes an option for the poor as subject. He notes that this can belong to the strategic mediation of the option, but he wants also to argue

---

197 Boff, Pixley, The Bible, the Church and the Poor, p.109 “Before being something that concerns the church, the option for the poor is something that concerns God”.
198 Clodovis Boff defines the difference between “theological” and “theologal” as the difference between the real (theologal) and the known (theological). See Clodovis Boff, Teologia e Prática, p.136 (ET, p.65). Another way to put this is to see it as the difference between what is revealed and the way the revelation is interpreted.
199 Vigil, “Que queda...?”, 2.3, sub-section Distinguir los niveles
200 Clodovis Boff, The Bible, the Church and the Poor, p.115. However, Boff does also acknowledge (p.116) what Vigil will call the strategic mediations of the option.
201 In this section, “Distinguir los niveles pero no separarlos indebidamente, he draws clearly on the work of Clodovis Boff, even if he does not cite him. I consider Boff in detail in Chapter 4.
that it is more fundamental, that an option for the poor which did not see
the poor as subject of their own history would deny them the right to be
those who are responsible for their own lives. This follows in part the
general argument of liberation theology that the poor also make an option
for the poor, sometimes understood perhaps more in terms of class
solidarity. But Vigil also wants to say that it is of fundamental importance
that because God opts for the poor, the poor, as the privileged ones of God,
must be given a leading role in determining their own present and future.\(^\text{202}\)

It is strategic, because ultimately the problem of poverty is an imposed one,
and cannot be solved by imposition of something else, but must emerge
from within the world of those who are impoverished. But it is also
theological, because it is about allowing God’s will to be done and God’s
chosen ones to fulfil what God has called them to do. The subjectivity of
the poor is thus God-dependent.

Thus for Vigil the option for the poor is founded in and on God who
reveals himself repeatedly as a God who responds to the cry of the poor
and oppressed. He returns to this theme in another article, published in
2004, where there is a certain re-phrasing of his argument.\(^\text{203}\)

Vigil first notes that there has been a tendency in liberation theology to “spiritualise”
the option for the poor. This complaint has been made repeatedly at least
since Puebla, which introduced the notion of preference. Vigil’s problem
with this is that it makes the option for the poor contingent. This is because
it is no longer the nature of God that determines the option for the poor, but
it relies on an ordering of acts of charity, which prioritises the poor without
distinguishing them.\(^\text{204}\)

Vigil offers five theses. The first thesis\(^\text{205}\) is that strictly speaking God
loves without preference or discrimination. In this sense, God does not opt
for anyone, but rather the love of God is what sustains the whole of
creation. It is important to recognise that this is the starting point for what
follows. The second thesis argues that God opts for justice,\(^\text{206}\) not as a

\(^{202}\) See Aparecida §398, stressing that the poor are themselves subjects of their own evangelisation.

\(^{203}\) “A opção pelos pobres é opção pela justiça, e não é preferencial. Para um reenquadramento teológico-
sistemático da opção pelos pobres”, [The option for the poor is an option for justice and not preferential.
For a new theological-systematic framework for the option for the poor], PerspTeol, 36 (2004), pp.241-
252. I work with the online version, www.servicioskoinonia.org/relat/371p.htm (accessed 10/10/06. An
English translation is available online at www.servicioskoinonia.org/ relat/371e.html. The following
paragraphs are taken in part from a paper I delivered at a Conference at the Theology Faculty of the
University of Southern Bohemia in České Budějovice in November 2006. The title of the paper was
“Liberation Theology Today”. It has been published as Tim Noble “Liberation Theology Today –
Challenges and Changes” in Michal Cáb, Roman Mička, Marek Pelech (eds.), Mezinárodní symposium o
teologii osvobození, České Budějovice, Teologická fakulta Jihočeské univerzity, 2007, pp.22-36

\(^{204}\) Vigil, “A Opção pelos pobres…”, Situação da questão

\(^{205}\) Each thesis has a sub-heading in Vigil’s text, so I will not note each one separately here.

\(^{206}\) See on this also Michelle Becka, “Eine Option für die Gerechtigkeit: Die Option für die Armen heute
in Theologie und Pastoral in Lateinamerika”, in Holztrattner (ed.), Eine vorrangige Option...?, pp.87-102,
who also refers to this article by Vigil.
preference, but alternatively and exclusively. The argument here is that justice is not something that God contingently happens to opt for, but rather being just, and therefore being on the side of those who suffer injustice, is integral to who God is. Therefore God must exclude from himself all that is unjust. This is the fundamental point. “Option” implies other possibilities, but God cannot opt to be not God, and thus God's siding with those who suffer injustice is necessary.\footnote{Clearly, the debate here over the implication of necessity to God is a complex one, which Vigil does not enter into. However, if we accept the basic insight of Rahner's famous trinitarian axiom regarding the identity of the immanent and economic Trinity, then we can assert that God is not other than God reveals himself to be. As God reveals himself constantly in the Scriptures to be a God of justice, it is therefore reasonable to assume that God is indeed a God of justice.}

The third thesis advances the argument by specifying the option for the poor as an option for those who suffer injustice. Here Vigil is making a new point, although he does not put it across as such. Certainly it is a point that follows from the preceding thesis, namely that God is essentially just, not essentially poor, so God's option is for those who suffer from injustice, not primarily for those who suffer from poverty. However, this means that the option for the poor is a somewhat inaccurate blanket term to describe God's option for those who are in any way victims of injustice.\footnote{It should be noted here that, at least in English, there is a problem of language. In Spanish Vigil uses the word “injusticiados”, translated into Portuguese as “injustiçados”, literally “the unjusticized”, those to whom injustice is done. Neither the word “victim” nor the word “suffers” is present, which avoids the danger of any sort of cult of victims. Those to whom injustice is done are not always or necessarily victims – this is an important part of the claim by liberation theology, espoused by Vigil in his previous article, that the poor are the subjects of their own history, not its objects.}

The fourth thesis returns to the second, arguing that the systematic theological foundation of the option for the poor is God's option for justice. Here again, the emphasis has shifted. Vigil had already made this move in an earlier article, where he notes that “in a … recategorisation of the Option for the Poor…, the Option for the Poor is, more precisely, ‘option for Justice’”.\footnote{Vigil, “Opção pelos pobres a o trabalho da teologia”, in Susín (ed.), Sarça Ardente, p.301} God does not opt for the poor on account of their poverty or because of something in the poor that arouses his compassion. Rather, it is a question of justice and the need for a just God to be just. This is really a \textit{de dicto} necessity, a logical consequence of God being who God is, rather than a contingent need for God to respond to problems in creation. Thus, fifthly, the option for the poor is not preferential but disjunctive and excluding. God excludes injustice, and consequently the unjust.\footnote{This is one way of reading the story of the final judgement in Matthew 25:31-46. Those who are excluded are expelled from the Kingdom because of a basic failure to act justly. The demand to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, is not supererogatory, but an integral part of human living, which is always social in nature, and thus always includes the need for justice.}
against injustice it demands that Christian life should be lived in such a way as to bring about a world where those to whom injustice is done have justice rendered to them. This has clear political and social implications, especially to the extent that the injustice has political, social and economic roots, which, the suggestion is, is most often the case.\footnote{Here we have another way of talking about the difference – though still not separation – between the theological and strategic levels of the Option for the Poor.}

A preferential option on the other hand is one which ultimately will smack of paternalism, for it implies that there is another choice, equally valid. In another essay, Vigil puts it like this: “[the option for the poor] is not exclusive in relation to people, but rather in relation to sinful attitudes and exclusive projects”.\footnote{Vigil, “Opção pelos pobres e trabalho da teologia”, in Susin (ed.), \textit{Sarça Ardente}, p.299. Something similar is said by Leonardo Boff, \textit{When Theology Listens to the Poor}, p.23. “The Church … opts for the poor, then, not in a sectarian fashion.. to the exclusion of all others, but in such wise as simultaneously to remain open to all other social classes as well.” Gustavo Gutiérrez put it this way: “God's love has two dimensions, the universal and the particular... God's love excludes no one. Nevertheless, God demonstrates a special predilection toward those who have been excluded from the banquet of life” in Hartnett, “Interview with Gustavo Gutiérrez”.}

Thus, the option for the poor can now be seen as an option for those to whom injustice is done. It is an option which is made in the first place by God, and consequently by Christians who seek to follow Christ, the one who preached the Kingdom which has at its heart this same option.\footnote{Vigil does not mention it at all in the article “A opção pelos pobres é opção pela justiça…” and in the article in Susin (ed.), \textit{Sarça Ardente}, p.304, he only mentions in passing the existence of “novos sujeitos”, “new subjects” for theology, but this is by way of introducing the new mediations which exist for the practice of the option for the poor. See also Hugo Assmann, “Apuntes sobre el tema del sujeto” in José Duque (ed.), \textit{Perfiles Teológicos para un Nuevo Milenio}, pp. 115-146. Assmann was one of the leading proponents of the idea of the poor as subject of their own history in the first wave of liberation theology, editing a book, for example, entitled \textit{Pueblo oprimido, señor de la historia}, Montevideo, Tierra Nueva, 1972. In the chapter cited here he critiques this earlier position. See briefly on this also above in section 1.1.1.3}

However, despite the assertion of the subjectivity of the poor, which to some extent seems to have disappeared from the discussion,\footnote{For example, Clodovis Boff, \textit{The Bible, the Church and the Poor}, pp.135-136, answers the question he poses himself: Who and What Makes the Option for the Poor? He responds by saying that in the first place it is the institutional church, in second place, lay Christians, in third place, the rich, and only finally the poor themselves.} the poor themselves always seem to be at one remove in the debate.\footnote{As Belli noted in the review which Vigil denounced, the idea of the poor and what needs to be done for them seems to come before the people themselves. Part of the problem, as two Brazilian writers express it in their discussion of the option for the poor, is that: “Frequently, the term [i.e., the option for the poor] has suffered from a lack of precision and actualisation connected with the types of poverty under discussion and the diagnosis of the causes}
of poverty”. This leads to an inherent danger, as Clodovis Boff powerfully puts it, that the option for the poor will lose its grounding in Christ: “It must never hypostasize the poor in Christ; this would be falling into idolatry and superstition. Besides, the poor themselves would be the first to rebel against being idealised into a fetish or totem.”

In the next section I turn to some anthropological studies which seem to suggest that this factor did not pass unnoticed by the poor either.

1.2 Critical Remarks on the Use of the Poor in Liberation Theology

I now turn to some more critical remarks concerning liberation theology. First I examine works by social anthropologists who have studied especially membership of the base communities (CEBs) and the relation to Pentecostalism, and then I look at a negative theological reading of liberation theology and its treatment of the poor.

1.2.1 The Poor and the Church: A Practical Problem

In this section I propose to examine some social anthropologists who have studied CEB membership, often in comparison with membership of Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal groups. I restrict myself here to examples from Brazil. Clearly, as with most fieldwork studies, there is a gap between the research being carried out and its publication, which especially in the rapidly changing reality of Latin America makes some of the research outdated even before it is published. Nevertheless, if individual details can be disputed, there is nothing to suggest that the trends which come out of the studies have been significantly reversed.

---

217 Boff, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor*, p.124
218 *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base*, Base Ecclesial Communities.
219 For an excellent overview of the more general situation in Latin America, see the article by Michael Bergunder, “The Pentecostal Movement and Basic Ecclesial Communities in Latin America: Sociological Theories and Theological Debates”, *International Review of Mission* 91 (no. 361), 2002, pp.163-186. Covering some of the authors I go on to discuss here, but also other sources from elsewhere in South and Central America, Bergunder argues persuasively that there are many possibilities for encounter between liberation theology and Pentecostalism, noting that there has been a “comparatively broad and rather positive reception of liberation theology concepts within Pentecostal theology” (p.179). See also Ondina E. González, Justo L. González, *Christianity in Latin America: A History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, especially here Chapter 10 on Pentecostalism. Note, however, that some of the figures they quote are either misprints (the charitable interpretation) or totally wild guesses – for example, the claim (p.283) that 47% of Brazilians are either members or adherents of Pentecostal churches.
220 However, it should be noted that recent research indicates that, for example, the fairly dramatic fall in the percentage of Catholics in the population seems to have stopped. See Marcelo Côrtes Neri, *A Economia das Religiões: Mudanças Recentes*, Rio de Janeiro, FGV / IBRE, CPS, 2007, p.4. The percentage of neo-Pentecostals has also increased, so that interestingly the fall is in the number of those who claim to have no religious affiliation.
I begin by examining two books by John Burdick, an American anthropologist. The first, *Looking for God in Brazil*, was first published in 1994, drawing on research from the late 1980s, carried out in a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Duque de Caxias, a large city just north of Rio de Janeiro. Burdick admits to being attracted by progressive Catholicism, but at the same time he began to question the gulf between the claims and the reality of CEBs. He sets himself the task in the book of answering the following questions: “Why is the People’s Church less popular than its rivals? Why are the CEBs losing the battle for souls? What do Pentecostalism and *umbanda* signify and offer to Brazil’s masses that the People’s Church does not?”

The answer to this question is found, for Burdick, in the different ways in which Catholicism – and especially progressive Catholicism – Pentecostal churches and *umbanda* understand the relationship between the life of faith and the world. So, for example, he writes: “The key differences between the main contenders for souls in São Jorge lie in their respective stances towards the possibility of personal transformation, on the one hand, and toward the allocation of responsibility for and proper response to misfortune, on the other.” The essential point which Burdick is making is to do with degrees of continuity, whether or not a particular religious practice and belief underlines a continuity between one’s faith and the world in which one lives, or whether rather it emphasises discontinuity, the need for transformation, for going beyond the world as it is to a new and totally different world.

Thus, he argues that Catholicism tends to support a view of what he calls world-continuity. That is to say, there is a continuum between the church

---


223 There is a long history of discussion on the relative size and – implicitly – importance of CEBs in the Brazilian religious landscape, though most authorities suggest that they have always been a minority within the Catholic Church. See, for example, Warren Hewitt, *Base Christian Communities and Social Change in Brazil*, Lincoln, Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 1991. However, it would appear that this minority continues to retain its place. See, for example, L.A. Gomez de Souza, “As CEBs vão bem, obrigado” (“The CEBs are doing fine, thank you”), *REB* 60 (2000), pp.93-110


225 Burdick, *Looking for God*, p.5


227 The point re-occurs several times. See as examples Burdick, *Looking for God*, pp.67, 151, 224
and the world. Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that liberation theology sees the need to work to change the world, which is done through conscientisation. In other words, responsibility for the way the world is resides with the individual, or at least the community, and they are the ones who must change it. Burdick points out that many people reject this, for it rather sounds like they are being blamed for their own situation, and all they need to do is work a bit harder and all will be well. Progressive Catholicism also requires greater commitment and higher levels of literacy – to be a member of a Bible-reading group such as a CEB does not absolutely necessitate being able to read, as the text can be read by someone else, but it at least calls for time to attend meetings, which assumes a certain stability, and probably in practice a basic level of literacy. Thus, at all the levels at which Burdick looks – socio-economic class, gender, race, youth, politics – he finds that the Catholic Church, especially the more progressive elements within it, always advocates a fundamental continuity between church and world, between the life of faith and the context in which that faith is lived.

Over against this, he argues, Pentecostalism and umbanda both offer greater possibilities of transformation. Here the responsibility is not with the individual or community who simply need to be more committed. Rather, both these groups give as an explanation of suffering the presence of a more or less personified evil. For Pentecostals it is the Devil, for umbanda different spirits, but the problem is exterior to the one who suffers the misfortune. But both also affirm that there is a choice, that one can choose God, who is more powerful than the Devil, or that the spirit can be in one way or another bought off or placated. Thus, one is not caught in a perpetual struggle with the world, but has the possibility of triumphing here and now.

This point will be worth bearing in mind later when I come to discuss the methodology of Clodovis Boff in Chapter 4, since it could be argued that his use of the socio-analytical mediation is indicative of what Burdick

---


229 See Burdick, *Looking for God*, p.224. The process of conscientisation, which is so central to the CEB methodology, developed, it should be remembered, at least in part out of the literacy programme developed by Paulo Freire, and described in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (trans. Myra Bergman Ramos), New York, Continuum, 2003 (orig. 1968, first English translation 1970).

230 There have been criticisms of Burdick’s book. For example, in a review, Daniel Levine points out that Burdick fails to acknowledge that the liberationist groups actually function like most groups, and that all the people he refers to are equally caught up in a particular culture which is itself a product of many impulses. See Daniel Levine, Review of *Looking For God in Brazil*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 34/1 (1995), pp.128-129. See also Manuel A. Vasquez, *The Brazilian Church and the Crisis of Modernity*, Cambridge, CUP, 1998, pp.218-226. One important question is how far it is possible to generalise out of particular case studies. However, it is not my intention to enter into the anthropological or sociological debate here, but rather to suggest that Burdick’s underlying point – that liberation theology is not able to offer to the poor what they need – is a valid one, at least in certain circumstances.

231 See Burdick, *Looking for God*, pp. 66-67
argues. For Boff, as shall be seen, a social scientific discourse about the world is the raw material on which liberation theologians reflect theologically. This can be compared with the words of a pastor of the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus quoted by a Brazilian sociologist of religion, Ari Pedro Oro: “If the problems move from the spiritual plane to the material, the solutions also move from the spiritual plane to the material”. Oro comments on this: “It should be noted that, in this case, there is a dislocation of the generative centre of the problems in the social field to the spiritual, with no questioning of the social system and the political-ideological manipulation found in it”. Oro's critical stance towards such forms of Pentecostalism does not diminish the reality of the gap between these forms and “popular” Catholicism of the type espoused by the CEBs and supported by liberation theology.

To sum this argument up in terms applicable to our previous examination of the understanding of the poor in liberation theology, it could be said that Burdick is arguing that liberation theology – or more accurately, those inspired by it - is engaged in telling the poor that they are poor, and perhaps giving some reasons, usually socio-economic or at most cultural, why that is the case. At best, though, this can only serve as confirmation of something which is already known. It offers no real hope of any immediate change, unless telling people to work harder is considered to be a sign of hope. Pentecostal churches and umbanda, on the other hand, offer a way out, the possibility of a genuinely new life.

Perhaps the most important point here is to do with the explanatory powers of the different approaches, which is not directly germane to my argument. It may, however, indicate that part of the problem lies in the naming of the problem, of what it is that

---

232 See below Chapter 4.1, on Boff’s method as outlined in his book Teologia e Prática.
233 The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, founded by Edir Macedo in Brazil in 1977. Gonzalez and Gonzalez, Christianity in Latin America, place it among heterodox or questionable movements (see pp.291-292), but it has many of the trappings of neo-Pentecostalism, although an even higher emphasis on a gospel of prosperity and miracles than other churches.
235 See, for example, ibid., p.321, where he critiques the idea that financial reward is a sure sign of approval that members of the church are engaged in a divine task.
236 As I was putting the final touches to this work, my attention was drawn to an article on Richard Shaull, Raimundo C. Barreto Jr., “Understanding Richard Shaull’s Third Conversion: Encountering Pentecostalism among the Poor”, Koinonia 16 (2004), pp.161-175. Barreto’s fascinating article shows how towards the end of his life Shaull was coming to see in Pentecostalism a genuinely exciting and transformative other. Pentecostalism, for him, had succeeded in giving voice to the real religious desires and beliefs of the poor and it was from Pentecostals that more traditional churches had to learn. It would be the encounter with the other poor that would lead to change and conversion. I have not had the chance to follow this up, but Barreto offers a bibliography which will enable the interested reader to see what Shaull himself had to say. Shaull, of course, was both a forerunner of much of liberation theology and a crucial point of intersection between Latin America (especially though by no means exclusively Brazil) and North America, and between ecumenical liberation theology in Latin America and Protestant theology in the north.
needs to be explained. For all the rhetoric, CEBs tend to be top-down organisations, dependent on clerical or at least institutional church support, so that the opportunities for really listening to the poor are in fact much more limited than is sometimes suggested.\textsuperscript{237} The poor exist as a group to be dealt with, a problem to be solved.

Before returning to the comparison between CEBs and Pentecostal churches, I want to look at a second work by Burdick, written some ten years after the first, \textit{Legacies of Liberation}.\textsuperscript{238} In this book Burdick returns to some of the issues he focused on in \textit{Looking for God in Brazil}, namely gender and race,\textsuperscript{239} but also on land ownership. If in the first book he had set out to examine what might be called the failure of liberation theology and the progressive Catholic Church with which it was closely related, in this second book he is more focused on the “success”. The two books, in that sense, need to be read together to provide a fuller picture of the reality. However, this book is written in a different Brazil, and benefits also from further research and reflection, and obviously time, a decade in which the frequent reports on the death of liberation theology were, as Mark Twain famously remarked of his own death, exaggerated.\textsuperscript{240}

The main argument of the book can be summed up succinctly. Whatever the official status of liberation theology within the Catholic Church today, its founding insights have continued to inspire and motivate diverse groups within the church as they struggle to create a more just society.\textsuperscript{241} Sometimes in unexpected ways black people, women and the landless have appropriated the rhetoric of progressive Catholicism and shown that it has the power to transform people’s lives by offering them an interpretive language and framework. This framework allows them both to name the problem they confront and to imagine ways of overcoming it.\textsuperscript{242}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[237] This is part of the argument of Pedro Trigo, “La Base en las Comunidades Eclesiales de Base”. See especially Parte Segunda Tratamiento Específico del Problema, 1.1 Muchas CEBS no son de base: priva el flujo comunicacional vertical. A similar point is made in Martins and de Pádua, “Option for the Poor and Pentecostalism…”, p.155
\item[240] Twain is reputed to have read his obituary in a newspaper and then cabled the Associated Press, stating that “Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated”.\textsuperscript{240}
\item[241] See also Martins and de Pádua, “Option for the Poor and Pentecostalism…”, p.144. A very similar point is made by André Ricardo de Souza, “A Igreja Católica e os Mercados: A ambivalência entre a solidariedade e a competição”, \textit{Religião e Sociedade}, 27/1 (2007), pp.156-174. See here especially pp.162-166 on the influence of liberation theology, for example, p.162 “A Teologia da Libertação teve seu processo de refluxo intensificado na década de 90, deixando marcas significativas no catolicismo brasileiro.”
\item[242] See, for example, the beginning of the Conclusion to the book, Burdick \textit{Legacies of Liberation}, p.139
\end{footnotes}
Burdick sees three key ways in which liberation theology and its practitioners have influenced Brazilian society. The first two, the inspiration it has provided and the type of contextually aware leadership it has produced, are important but not of direct concern here, since in a way they can be seen as potentially continuing the problems of top-down imposition of alien ideas which were referred to in Burdick’s previous book. The third perhaps manages to correct or control this danger. Here he looks at how the grassroots groups have been affected. He sums up: “What I have endeavoured to document … are the various ways in which the liberationist vision has been reshaped and appropriated at the base to make it more compatible with local understandings and ideology.” In other words, one of the ways in which liberation theology has led to successful outcomes is when it has actually listened to those whom it identifies as its privileged group, namely the poor.

It should, however, be noted that, whilst to some extent Legacies of Liberation offers a corrective to Looking for God in Brazil, in fact the two books deal with slightly different issues. The latter looks at the reception of liberation theology by what might be called its target audience, whilst the former concentrates on those who have acted as agents, pastoral or otherwise. Nevertheless, important though this distinction is, for part of the problem is precisely in the failure of agents to understand the nature of those for whom they take themselves to be acting, it should not be taken as an absolute. The way in which, for example, the landless poor have been helped in their struggle to gain land on which they can begin to plan a sustainable future owes much to liberation inspiration. Thus, liberation theology – and the practice which it has both reflected and inspired – is seen in Burdick’s book to have had both successes and failures.

For my purposes in this work, Burdick’s books suggest two things. The first, demonstrated most in the second book, is that there has been a great deal of interaction between theologians and the grassroots, and that this mutual interaction, in which each has allowed the other to be its other, has motivated both activists and theologians to develop in their positions. However, against this, the first book especially calls attention to the nature of the “grassroots” with which the theologians are in contact. Mostly these are not the poorest of the poor, but the pastoral agents, those who are

---

243 Ibid., p.141
244 Ibid., p.142
245 Another aim of Burdick’s book is to question the general perception of what counts as a successful outcome. See Legacies of Liberation, pp.10, 142-143
246 For a history of the Brazilian Church’s own Rural Pastoral Commission (CPT), see the reflections by its first secretary, Ivo Polletto, “Aos 25 anos, uma documentação do tempo germinal em que nasceu a CPT”, available online at www cptnacional.org.br/?system=news&action=read&id=1187&eid=26 (accessed 5/9/07). See also on the landless movement in Brazil, Maria Clara Bingemer, “Living the Faith to Arrive in the Promised Land”, Communio Viatorum 46 / 1 (2004), pp.63-89
already engaged in some form of ministry in their churches and communities: these are the Gramscian organic intellectuals, so beloved of liberation theology.\footnote{I go into this below, 1.2.2, in my discussion of theological questionings of liberation theology.} Because these people are themselves usually poor, it is not true to say, based on the evidence in Burdick's books, that liberation theologians do not listen to the poor. Nevertheless, the question at least remains open as to whether the theologians do not confuse the voices they hear with the voices of the majority, especially of the very poorest.

Although socio-political questions are often assumed to have greater weight in discussions about the relative success or failure of liberation theology,\footnote{To cite just two examples, see José Maria Vigil, “Que queda de la opción por los pobres?”, which was discussed above, and Daniel Bell, 	extit{Liberation Theology After the End of History: The refusal to cease suffering}, London / New York, Routledge, 2001} it is also true, as we have noted in Burdick's first book, that the rise of Pentecostal or neo-Pentecostal churches\footnote{On the difference between Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches, see Douglas B. McGaw, “Meaning and Belonging in a Charismatic Congregation: An Investigation into Sources of Neo-Pentecostal Success”, 	extit{Review of Religious Research} 21/3 (1980), pp.284-301, here pp.284-285. For a brief introduction to the history of Pentecostalism in Brazil see Francisco Cartuxo Rolim, “Gênese do Pentecostalismo no Brasil”, 	extit{REB} 41/161 (1981), pp.119-140 and more recently, João Déci Passos, 	extit{Pentecostais: Orígenes e começo}, São Paulo, Paulinas, 2005} in Latin America has also occasioned a good deal of soul-searching on the part of liberation theologians. Alongside this, it has proved a fertile area for socio-anthropological research.\footnote{One of the leading scholars is Ricardo Mariano. See his 	extit{Neopentecostais: Sociologia do Novo Pentecostalismo no Brasil}, São Paulo, Loyola, 2005} Before turning to this, however, I will briefly examine a Pentecostal approach to poverty.\footnote{Robert Mapes Anderson, 	extit{Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism}, New York, Oxford University Press, 1979, an important text on the rise of Pentecostalism in America, makes reference, as the title itself suggests, to the link between Pentecostalism and the poor, going back to the Azusa Street experience of 1906. See a comment on this by Brett Knowles, “Is the Future of Western Christianity Pentecostal?”, in John Stenhouse, Brett Knowles (eds.), \textit{The Future of Christianity: Historical, Sociological, Political and Theological Perspectives from New Zealand}, Adelaide, ETF Press, 2004, pp.39-59, here p.42. Knowles also goes on to look at reasons for the spread of Pentecostalism, some of which at least are relevant for Brazil. See also Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 	extit{Christianity in Latin America}, pp.271-280, on the rise of Pentecostalism in Chile, especially among the poor. For a strong critique of this by three Brazilian Protestant theologians, see Rodolfo Guede Neto, Laude Erandi Brandenburg, Evrando Jair Meurer, \textit{Teologia da Prosperidade e Nova Era}, São Leopoldo, IEDG, 1998, especially the contribution by Neto, “Teologia da Prosperidade e diaconia”, pp.5-20. He asks four questions of the Igreja Universal (pp.11-13), which are worth noting: “Can people’s well-being be measured by money?, Can the problems of the povo (ordinary people) be resolved in an individualised way?, Where is the community based on solidarity?, “Even apart from the believer, can God be coerced?” On the theology of prosperity see Mariano, \textit{Neopentecostais}, pp.147-186. Keith Warrington, \textit{Pentecostal Theology: A Theology of Encounter}, London, T&T Clark, 2008, p.238, calls the prosperity gospel an “aberrant gospel”, and points to some Pentecostal authors who have argued against it. On subsequent pages he considers the relationship of Pentecostalism to social transformation. On the role of the theology of prosperity based on research in one particular Brazilian neo-Pentecostal church but with wider}
acceptance of the status quo, a number of Pentecostal theologians have also reflected on the theme of liberation.\textsuperscript{253} One such example is a Nicaraguan Pentecostal, Miguel Angel Casco, who writes on liberation as the work of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{254} He begins by recounting a story from his childhood, when he asked his father why they were poor. His father replied that it was God’s will. He goes on “after a while I became aware that my father was sincere, but that he was wrong. This was not, is not and never shall be the will of God”.\textsuperscript{255} This leads him to consider the meaning of liberation, which he understands as “the process of an action towards freedom”.\textsuperscript{256} This action can be seen as the action of the Spirit, who desires “to act through our hands, our lips, our feet and by means of all our actions, making us aware that liberation as a work of the Spirit does not happen as if by magic but by concrete actions of those who love God and walk in the freedom of the Spirit”.\textsuperscript{257} Although he makes a clear distinction between the spiritual and material planes,\textsuperscript{258} at the same time, he argues forcefully that liberation must be integral. In other words, attention must be given to both, since both are a fundamental part of true liberation in the Spirit. He ends by relating another story of an advertisement for an evangelical campaign in Nicaragua, in which a pastor encourages a worker who complains that his salary is insufficient for him and his family to eat, by telling him not to worry, but just seek Jesus.\textsuperscript{259} For Casco, this is certainly not liberation. “Who benefits from this type of discourse?”, he asks, answering “Surely the only one who benefits is the boss... but this is a reflection of the relations existing between altar and throne, between altar and capital”.\textsuperscript{260} Although Casco would seem to be in a minority in Latin American Pentecostalism, it is

\textsuperscript{253} Perhaps the most complete is Carmelo Alvarez (ed.), Pentecostalismo y Liberación. Una Experiencia Latinoamericana, San José, Costa Rica, DEI, 1992. Some of the problems in any attempts at ecumenical dialogue can be seen from the contribution in this collection by two Brazilians, Orlando Silva and Joel Stevenatto, “El Pentecostalismo en Brasil”, pp.17-35, whose succinct summary of Catholicism in Brazil runs as follows (p.21): “Catholicism is impregnated with religious and idolatrous superstition”. One imagines this may not be the most helpful starting point for encounter. For a slightly more nuanced approach by mainly Catholic writers, see Alberto Antoniazzi (ed.), Nem Anjos, Nem Demônios: Interpretações sociológicas do Pentecostalismo, Petrópolis, Vozes, 1984. The first part of the title means “Neither Angels nor Demons”.

\textsuperscript{254} Miguel Angel Casco, “Liberación: obra del Espíritu”, in Alvarez (ed.), Pentecostalismo y Liberación, pp.191-199

\textsuperscript{255} Ibid., p.191

\textsuperscript{256} Ibid., p.193

\textsuperscript{257} Ibid., p.195

\textsuperscript{258} Ibid., p.197 “Material needs require material responses, and spiritual needs require spiritual responses”.

\textsuperscript{259} Casco, “Liberación: obra del Espíritu”, p.198

\textsuperscript{260} Ibid., p.198
important to hear his voice, too, since it perhaps reflects more accurately grassroots instincts.\textsuperscript{261}

Although it would be possible to devote more space to the theme of the poor in Pentecostalism,\textsuperscript{262} as it is not the focus of this work, I now move to an example of a socio-anthropological reading of the relationship between Pentecostalism and the poor. Cecília Loreto Mariz is a Brazilian anthropologist who is one of the leading researchers into the ways in which Pentecostals and CEBs have dealt with the question of poverty, and so I turn now to her book, \textit{Coping with Poverty}.\textsuperscript{263}

Mariz operates from a Weberian perspective, with a particular attention to micro-social questions, because the “micro approach stresses the standpoint of the poor themselves”.\textsuperscript{264} Her book, she says,

\begin{quote}
 attempts to identify the influence of religion in the way people deal with poverty and to understand aspects of the religious transformations in Brazil and to see if the popularity of each religion in Brazil depends on the adequacy of the supports each religion offers its population”.\textsuperscript{265}
\end{quote}

Although Mariz’ stress on a micro-approach can lead to what seems a somewhat anecdotal style,\textsuperscript{266} she brings a range of sources to support her contention that Pentecostalism does seem to help those in the poorest stratum of society, either to improve their situation somewhat or at least to

\textsuperscript{261} I am concentrating here on Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism, because they have had the greatest influence on contemporary Catholicism, especially the type espoused by liberation theology. However, at least in passing, attention should be drawn to what are generally called traditional Protestant churches or churches of mission. Two points are worth noting here. The first is that, in Brazil at any rate, these churches, though smaller in number of members, are growing at a faster rate than the Pentecostals, as Neri, \textit{A Economia das Religiões}, p.5, points out. The second is that many of them, even from the Evangelical wing of Protestantism, have been both more ecumenical and more open to liberation theology. On this, see Pus F. Helfenstein, \textit{Evangelikale Theologie der Befreiung: Das Reich Gottes in der Theologie der “Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana” und der gängigen Befreiungstheologie, ein Vergleich}. Zürich, Theologischer Verlag, 1991 and Sharon Heaney, \textit{Contextual Theology for Latin America: Latin American Themes in Evangelical Perspective}, Milton Keynes, Paternoster, 2008. Apart from Jorge Pixley and Milton Schwantes, already mentioned above, names such as René Padilla, Orlando Costa, José Miguez Bonino and Elsa Tamez are just a few that can be recalled here.

\textsuperscript{262} Particulary fascinating here is André Corten, \textit{Os Pobres e o Espírito Santo}. Perhaps because of his background as a political scientist and writer on discourse analysis, Corten, in my view, creates an excessive and unjustified dichotomy between liberation theology and Pentecostalism, and, moreover, is unbalanced in his reading of liberation theology. Nevertheless, his book makes for interesting reading, and is certainly important to take into consideration when examining the phenomenon of Pentecostalism in Brazil. His conclusions, however, though phrased somewhat differently, do not differ substantially from Burdick or others whom I will investigate.


\textsuperscript{264} Mariz, \textit{Coping with Poverty}, p.4

\textsuperscript{265} Ibid., p.9 It will be obvious from this why one reviewer suggested that “Mariz’s [book] may be seen as a complement to Burdick’s in-depth anthropological research”. Madeleine Adriance, Review of \textit{Coping with Poverty}, \textit{Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion}, 33/4, (1994), pp.398-399, here p.398

\textsuperscript{266} Adriance, in her review, criticises the methodology, although acknowledging that the anecdotes give “depth and texture” to the book. Adriance, “\textit{Coping with Poverty}”, p.398
find stability. On the other hand, members of CEBs, though still poor in most measurements of poverty, are nevertheless somewhat better off than members of Pentecostal churches. Frequently, they will have to some extent resolved their economic difficulties before becoming engaged in CEBs, whereas Pentecostal church members often join these churches to seek help to overcome or alleviate problems in their lives.

Mariz’ analysis of the relative successes of CEBs and Pentecostals in enabling their adherents to deal with poverty concentrates on three different areas, investigating the material, political and cultural strategies which each adopts and promotes. As she sums up her argument, she suggests that “CEBs offer strategies for coping with poverty that are more useful to the poor community as a whole, rather than to individuals. By contrast, Pentecostalism fosters strategies that better support individuals, especially those who face personal crises”. Despite this different focus – the CEBs on the community and the Pentecostals on the individual – it is clear that neither group finds any religious meaning in poverty. The CEBs, “[d]espite considering the poor as chosen people,... view poverty as an injustice or sin that must be fought. Because they are the victims of this injustice, the poor are chosen by God to head this fight”. She also concludes that, although the motivations for engagement are different, there may well be no long-term differentiation between CEBs and Pentecostals in terms of political involvement.

Mariz’ findings and predictions have been reinforced by further studies over the past ten years or so. For example, Robin Nagle, working under Mariz, and in one of the areas where Mariz had done her research, a neighbourhood of Recife in north-eastern Brazil, examined the conflict between two rival groups in a Catholic parish. One group favoured the liberationist priest, Padre Reginaldo, whilst the other was opposed to him,

---

267 Mariz, *Coping with Poverty*, pp.34-42. In an article which preceded her book, offering a summary of her findings, Cecilia Loreto Mariz, “CEBs e Pentecostalismo: novas reformas da religião popular no Brasil”, *REB* 51/203 (1991), pp.599-611, she offers the following summary: “The Catholic Church opts for the poor because it is not a church of the poor. The Pentecostal Churches do not opt for the poor because they already are a church of the poor, and it is for this reason that the poor opt for them”.

268 Ibid., pp.42-50 See also Clodovis Boff, “The Catholic Church and the New Churches in Latin America”, available online at www.sedos.org/english/boff_1.html (accessed 18/9/07), section 1 Seeing (Socio-Analytical), sub-section b., Existential Abandonment, reporting survey results on the reasons why people join Pentecostal churches, drawing especial attention to illness, family problems, alcoholism and emotional problems. This article is probably from the mid-1990s, though the exact date is not given on the website. However, Bergunder, “The Pentecostal Movement...” cites an article with a similar title and theme from a SEDOS meeting in 1999, and back-reading from some statistics cited by Boff on numbers of Pentecostals leads to a date somewhere in the second half of the 1990s.

269 Ibid., p.156

270 Ibid., p.159

271 Ibid., p.160

with support from the conservative bishop of Recife. Here the opposition was not so much between CEBs and Pentecostals, as between two rival versions of what the role of religion was from a Catholic perspective. Nevertheless, in practice, the “conservative” Catholic position, though apparently different to the Pentecostal one in many ways, actually espoused a similar worldview to at least some strands of Pentecostalism. Citing Bourdieu, she refers to “incomparable theories of practice”, so that there were stark disagreements about the understanding of how one negotiates a difficult life, what compromises one will or will not make, and what accommodations are necessary to achieve a variety of ends. Such an array of choices in turn pointed to divergent definitions of self, community, history, tradition, politics and religions.\footnote{Ibid., p.22. The reference to Bourdieu is to Pierre Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, Cambridge, CUP, 1977, p.15}

She suggests that liberation theology’s problems were caused by its ultimate failure to distinguish and understand the members of its target group.

[Liberation theology’s] biggest weaknesses were its inability to recognise the role of crucial historic, political and economic forces that shaped the choices of “the poor”, those meant to be “liberated” by this new Catholicism, and its inability to appreciate that the “the poor” cannot be met as an undifferentiated collection of people with the same world view, needs, and desires.\footnote{Nagle, Claiming the Virgin, p.24 It should be noted that Nagle offers a more positive conclusion about the continued need for liberation theology, something which Kenneth Serbin notes in his review of her and other books, “Bowling Alone”, Bishops’ Biographies and Baptism By Blood: New Views of Progressive Catholicism in Brazil’, Latin American Politics and Society 43/4 (2001), pp.127-141, here see p.134}

I shall return to this briefly, after one final comment on the levels of political engagement found amongst Pentecostals, especially in Brazil.\footnote{See for example Maria das Dores Machado, Política e Religião: a participação dos evangélicos nas eleições. Rio de Janeiro: FGV, 2006, and the review article on this book by Suene dos Santos de Almeida, “Um Olhar sobre o Assistencialismo e o Corporativismo na Política Evangélica” in Religião e Sociedade, Rio de Janeiro, 27/2 (2007), pp.213-228}

There has been a fair amount of work done on this topic recently, which tends to bear out Mariz’ prediction that the long-term political consequences of Pentecostalism and CEBs membership are likely to be similar.

Paul Freston, an English sociologist who has lived and worked in Brazil for some years now, has written extensively on this topic.\footnote{Here I refer to Paul Freston, Evangelicals and Politics In Africa, Asia and Latin America, Cambridge, CUP, 2001. The chapter on Brazil is from pp.11-58.} He notes that there are different attitudes to politics amongst Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals. So, for example, the Assemblies of God is the largest Pentecostal Church in Brazil.\footnote{The Assemblies of God (Assembléias de Deus), one of the historical Pentecostal churches in the country, was founded by Swedish missionaries coming from the USA in 1911. According to the 2000}
Pentecostals into politics, especially with the Constituent Assembly elections in 1986, the majority of national evangelical politicians came from this church. Freston notes that the political system in Brazil tends, anyway, to favour the participation of religious groups, characterised as it is by “a federalist structure, relatively open mass media, weak parties and a proportional electoral system with state-wide voting districts, increasing the electoral chances of a dispersed minority”. Initially evangelical interests focussed on the safeguarding of religious freedom, and matters of morality, although they were not as conservative, even at the beginning, as was sometimes suggested. Subsequently, as Freston demonstrates, there has been a growing rapprochement between, especially, the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores – Workers' Party) of the current Brazilian President, Inacio “Lula” da Silva, and certain elements within the evangelical movement. In the past few years, the changes have continued. For example, the dominant political power is now exercised by the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God). This church has perhaps been the most successful in terms of marketing and gaining media and other outlets for the propagation of its message. They would also seem to have been most successful in garnering the support of church members for church candidates. These people are often known to the church membership through their appearances in the church-owned media. There is a growing convergence with the left, one which, if anything, has strengthened in the years since Freston wrote this book.
A more recent development has seen the launch of a political party which would seem to have close links to the *Igreja Universal*. It began as the *Partido Municipalista Renovador* (PMR) in August 2005, and was renamed *Partido Republicano Brasileiro* (PRB) at the beginning of 2006. The party was formed from a breakaway group from within the *Partido Liberal* (PL). Its aim was to signal support for the government of Lula, under threat from a scandal at the time. This was in keeping with the fact that in the 2002 elections the *Igreja Universal* urged its followers to vote for Lula in the second round of voting.

It is not clear if the turn to the left among Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals has been driven by the interests of the leadership or the needs of the members of the various churches. However, the research I have examined suggests that the commitment of evangelicals has been such that they have had at least as much to contribute to the attempted transformation of society as the groups inspired by liberation theology, and often centred around the CEBs. There is an especially interesting distinction between the rural poor and the new urban poor, with the former remaining predominantly Catholic and the latter moving towards either neo-Pentecostalism or professing no religious belief at all. The need for a more detailed study of religious affiliation and voting patterns in recent elections is clear, and would provide firmer ground. In the meantime, research does at least show that it is the very poorest in terms of income who seem to opt for the neo-Pentecostal churches, so that the average wage for Pentecostals is about 75% of that of Catholics, who, however, themselves form the second lowest group of wage earners in terms of religious membership.

---

286 The Brazilian Constitution has a formal separation of Church and State, (see Article 19:1, which forbids the state to establish or support any particular church) so no direct link can be stated in the Party’s manifesto. However, news reports are clear that the aim of the party was to provide a direct political voice for the *Igreja Universal*. See, for example, the online news version of the main Brazilian TV news programme, Jornal Nacional on Globo Television (Brazil’s largest television station), for Sept. 29th 2005, which states categorically, “The PMR is linked to the Universal Church”, “Vice-presidente José Alencar se filia ao Partido Municipalista Renovador”, available online at http://jornalnacional.globo.com/Jornalismo/JN/0,,AA1044969-3586,00.html, accessed 18/9/07.

287 The *Partido Liberal* was one of the coalition partners in the Congress and Senate which supported Lula and the PT.


289 See on this Marcelo Côrtes Neri, *A Economia das Religiões*, p.7, and pp.23 ff. It is, though, important to note that even in the area where the poorest people tend to congregate, the outskirts of the major conurbations, there are still almost 63% of Catholics compared to 17.5% of Pentecostals.

290 *Ibid*, p.35. The figures are from 2003, R$1496 for neo-Pentecostals and R$2023 for Catholics. The average of the eight groups mentioned is just over R$2850.
The question which remains, then, is whether liberation theology, for all its insistence on placing the poor at the forefront of its theology, has lost (or perhaps never gained) the very people it seeks to serve. Before moving on to examine this in more detail, I turn very briefly to some theological objections to the use of the poor as a locus theologicus.

1.2.2 The Poor and the Gospel: A Theological Problem
There have been a number of responses to liberation theology, not only from the sociological perspective. These anthropological or sociological studies have on the whole been pragmatic – has the liberation approach had the effect which it claimed, and has it done what it purportedly set out to do? However, there have also been theological critiques of liberation theology. Some of these I return to in the next chapter, but here I want to look at a book by Eddy Muskus,\(^{291}\) which deals especially with the theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez.

Muskus comes from an evangelical perspective, and would seem to be opposed to the basic tenets of liberation theology. His work is, on the whole, critical of the liberation perspective and is problematic in many aspects – there are, for example, several factual errors even in the first few pages.\(^{292}\) Moreover, his own critique of Gutiérrez is lacking in any self-criticism, so that he applies his own reading to Gutiérrez often without sufficiently arguing his grounds, especially when commenting on the latter’s treatment of Bartolomé Las Casas.\(^{293}\) Nevertheless, it is worth examining some of what he says about liberation theology’s understanding of the poor, since he offers a clear and not uncommon critique of the topic, and the methodological faults do not in and of themselves make what he says wrong.

Before turning to the more specific theological critique, it should be noted that a central plank of Muskus’ argument is that liberation theology, despite its claims, is not indigenous to the poor of Latin America. He writes in relation to Gutiérrez’s use of two concepts - Gramsci’s concept of the organic intellectual, and Bloch’s conviction about the revolutionary potential of oppressed people – that the

---


\(^{292}\) So, on p. 4, he claims that Gutiérrez’s thesis on Freud was part of his philosophy degree, whilst in fact it was for philosophy and psychology, and that he was awarded his doctorate in 1959, whereas in fact this was in 1985. Biographical information on Gutiérrez is readily available in, for example, Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez: An Introduction to Liberation Theology*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1990, pp.22-23. However, note that this seems to claim that Gutiérrez received his doctorate in Lyons in 1986, whereas Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Set You Free*, which includes the transcript of the doctoral defence, says it was May 29\(^{th}\) 1985 (see p.1).

\(^{293}\) He devotes a lot of space to this, including a whole chapter, pp.23-51. Muskus accuses Gutiérrez of misreading and misquoting Las Casas, but the examples he adduces are not conclusive. It really depends on the perspective from which one reads the texts, rather than on what the texts actually say.
dependence on these two concepts demonstrates that liberation theology is not a theology which emerges from the poor and oppressed of Latin America but is rather the imposition of well defined socio-economic and political ideas nurtured by the grassroots organisers, who are directly involved in the process of conscientisation.  

To some extent, Muskus has a point here. Liberation theology is conceptually dependent on western ideas. However, it may be that he has failed to understand what is being claimed by liberation theology when it says that it emerges from the poor. As far as I am aware, no one is saying that the poor of Latin America are spontaneously applying conceptual categories drawn from the history of western intellectual life to their own condition in an academically rigorous fashion. Rather, the questions and the experiences of the poor are reflected on by the theologian, who uses the tools which she or he judges most appropriate. But the starting point remains the questions and experiences, not the analytical tools. An example from another area may help clarify this. I go to the doctor, complaining of feeling unwell, and on the basis of the symptoms I report, the doctor makes a diagnosis which often seems to involve rather complicated Latin names which I would not use. In other words, he is using analytic tools at his disposal to describe my condition. But it is me who remains ill, and only with my cooperation in the treatment he recommends can I expect to get better.

I have given some space to this argument, because one of the critiques which is raised against liberation theology by Muskus is that its own arguments against ideology are themselves ideological.  

I will look in more detail at the question of ideology in the next chapter, but here it suffices to note this criticism and leave hanging the question as to whether liberation theology can make a non-ideological critique of ideology.  

Part of Muskus’ argument seems to be based on an inherent distrust of the Roman Catholic Church, especially in Latin America.  

---

294 Muskus, Origins and Early Development, p.53. The references to Gutiérrez are to A Theology of Liberation, p.10 (Gramsci) and pp.123-124 (Bloch), though in this place Muskus does not make this particular link.

295 Muskus, Origins and Early Development, p.61.

296 There is, of course, the broader question of whether any non-ideological critique of ideology is possible, or whether, when it comes to ideology, we are always faced by an infinite regress. There is, moreover, a narrower question to do with Muskus’ own ideological position, which he is less ready to identify.

297 See, for example, Muskus, Origins and Early Development, p.64 “This type of Christianity [sc. Roman Catholicism] has affected most people in Latin America in one way or another, and any features associated with culture and popular beliefs are tainted by that fact”.

the fact or not, too deeply engrained in Catholicism to be able to challenge the attitudes which it fosters.\textsuperscript{298}

A major criticism which Muskus makes against Gutiérrez is connected to the re-reading of history which the latter regards as an integral part of the work of liberation theology. For Gutiérrez, one of the aims of liberation theology is indeed precisely to tell the faith story of Latin America, from the perspective of the poor.\textsuperscript{299} As already mentioned above, this, despite what Muskus claims,\textsuperscript{300} does not necessarily represent an imposition from above. Organic intellectuals are not divorced from, but part of the context on which they reflect.\textsuperscript{301} However, for Muskus, the implication seems to be that, in using the ideas of Gramsci and the Peruvian philosopher José Maria Mariátegui, Gutiérrez is somehow making an illicit move.\textsuperscript{302}

Thus, Muskus has two major disagreements with the theological methodological claims of liberation theology. One is that it is an imposition of ideas on to the poor, rather than emerging from the poor themselves, and the other is that these ideas are anyway not Christian, so that ultimately liberation theology is not a theology. Although, as I have indicated, the logic of his argument is not very strong, and rests more on assertion than proof, this does not mean that what he says is entirely unjustified.\textsuperscript{303} Especially the first point is one to which I shall return. Does liberation theology give voice to the “hopes and joys, the sorrows and anguish”\textsuperscript{304} of the poor, or does it, so to speak, hijack their experience for its own ends?\textsuperscript{305}

Muskus has further arguments against liberation theology which relate to variant understandings of the Bible. He criticises Gutiérrez for his desire to

\textsuperscript{298} This is the argument also of André Corten, Os Pobres e o Espírito Santo, pp.31-34, on liberation theology’s participation in what Corten calls “the erudite heresy”. He sees it as being too interested in pleasing the Church to really attend to the needs of the poor.

\textsuperscript{299} This is seen in the very title of his book “The Power of the Poor in History”, and the essay on “Theology from the Underside of History”. It is indeed a particular perspective, which Gutiérrez seeks to justify biblically and theologically in his works.

\textsuperscript{300} Muskus, Origins and Early Developments, p.71 “It is misleading to maintain the assertion that a radical change is taking place, when all along it has been an imposition of ideas from the organic intellectuals”.

\textsuperscript{301} See Antonio Gramsci, “The Intellectuals”, in Selections from the Prison Notebooks, (Trans. and Ed. Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith), New York, International Publishers, 1971 pp. 3-23. In their introduction, Hoare and Smith note that “organic intellectuals are distinguished less by their profession, which may be any job characteristic of their class, than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong.”

\textsuperscript{302} So I read Muskus, Origins and Early Development, p.72, pp.76-77

\textsuperscript{303} I refer back to my assessment of Burdick’s work above.

\textsuperscript{304} Gaudium et Spes 1

\textsuperscript{305} In passing, however, it should be noted that this is a different question from Muskus’ attempts to show that liberation theology is not native to Latin America. It is rather hard to see what he is arguing against here, since no one, as far as I am aware has ever argued that there is no outside influence on liberation theology and that it does not draw on western ideas. What is autochthonous about it is the way in which it has married these different ideas and brought them together into a new way of doing theology. Muskus is right to point to the European antecedents of liberation theology, but this does not warrant his conclusions. See, for example, Muskus, Origins and Early Development, p.113
Chapter One: In Search of the Poor

establish “an ecumenical perspective of universal brotherhood”.

Muskus considers that there is no real New Testament justification for an emphasis on universalism, though he does not appear to define what he means by the term “universalism”. Muskus responds to this by drawing on the Johannine texts which refer to the distinction between the church and the world. The argument he is advancing would seem to be the following. Liberation theology is, essentially, Pelagian, since it requires human endeavour to achieve what is properly of God. Human unity is only possible through unity in and through the saving work of Jesus. So, he suggests that “Gutiérrez is not expressing a biblical truth when he relies on the praxis of the poor”.

Despite what seems to me either a misreading of or simply a total failure to understand the writings of Gutiérrez, this should not obscure the fact that Muskus may have a useful intuition of one of the problems which liberation theology undoubtedly faces. The problem in question concerns the exact nature of the relationship between the theology of liberation and the poor. From and on what grounds can liberation theology legitimately claim to speak for the poor? Muskus claims that liberation theology has no biblical foundation, and is the result of the imposition of a particular methodology. He further suggests that “the claim that God has taken sides with … poor men and women has little or no biblical support.”

Ultimately, for Muskus, liberation theology has failed, among other reasons, because, as he concludes,

> opting for the poor is methodologically flawed because it is an optimistic view of human nature and demonstrates a lack of awareness for personal sin… Only a supernatural gospel of grace, Christologically orientated, can deal effectively with the social problems, which distress and occupy the attention of Latin American liberation theologians… But seeking to formulate new theologies is not the answer. It is my conviction that a biblical gospel, which results in a personal experience of God’s saving grace, will inevitably influence and contribute significantly towards the transformation of society. This type of transformation

---

306 Muskus, *Origins and Early Development*, p.140
307 Muskus does not use the term “Pelagian”, which is my interpretation of phrases such as “[Gutiérrez] is relying on human efforts for harmony and peace”, Muskus, *Origins and Early Development*, p.141
308 Ibid., p.141 Muskus says that this can be argued, though he does not do so at this point.
310 “I have argued that the option for the poor has no Biblical foundation”, *Origins and Early Development*, p.255. However, it is not clear to me precisely where he deems himself to have argued this, rather than stated it, as noted above, for example, p.141.
311 Muskus, *Origins and Early Development*, p.255. Admittedly, it is hard to prove a negative, but he does not seem to dialogue with the work of, for example, Pixley or Mesters on biblical foundations for the option for the poor, so it is hard to know why he is so confidently dismissive.
changes individual lives, which then in turn affects society and all its sinful structures.\textsuperscript{312}

This is to restate in theological language some of the conclusions of the anthropological research. Liberation theology has always argued that the poor will only achieve liberation from sin (structural but also personal, it should be noted\textsuperscript{313}) if there is a radical transformation of society, leading to the instauration of kingdom values in the world. The poor themselves – and all those who are true followers of the poor Christ and therefore in solidarity with the poor – are the agents of this transformation. Against this is the argument that the radical conversion of individuals will lead to the transformation of society, since sin is always at heart a personal act of rebellion against God, and only when the individual, through coming to faith in Christ, recognises his or her responsibility is there any hope of change. For people such as Muskus, who espouse this second view, liberation theology is regarded as at best a misguided attempt to “Christianise” a secular socio-economic discourse of liberation. Thus, it is bad theology and probably bad sociology and bad liberative praxis, since it cannot hope to achieve what it sets out to do.

\textbf{1.3 Summary and Outline of Subsequent Chapters}

In this opening chapter, I have looked at the poor in liberation theology. Given that the poor are the \textit{locus theologicus} par excellence for liberation theology, and thus the subject of a vast amount of reflection, this investigation has necessarily been summary in form. In the first part, I showed how liberation theologians have sought to find biblical justification for their claims concerning the centrality of the poor as the privileged place of encounter with the saving and liberating God, who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, one who was poor himself and who proclaimed the Good News of the Kingdom as Good News for the poor. This was followed by an examination of the many different ways in which liberation theology has sought to speak of the poor. First, I noted that there is no one definition of the poor. In a sense this is understandable. In St. Paul’s Cathedral in London on the tomb of the building’s architect, Sir Christopher Wren, there is an inscription that reads, “\textit{Si monumentum requieris, circumspice},” “if you require a monument, look around you”. In much of Latin America, liberation theologians could easily respond to enquiries about the nature of the poor, “\textit{si pauperes requieris},”

\textsuperscript{312} Muskus, \textit{_origins and Early Development}, p.268. Of course whether his Augustinian reading of the nature of the Christian faith is either the sole possible one, or the correct one, is a question which Muskus does not address. Nor does he offer any Biblical justification of an Enlightenment individual reading of the Scriptures, since the emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus is not a Scriptural reading at all.

\textsuperscript{313} José Gonzalez Faus, “Pecado” (Sin), Sobrino, Ellacuría (eds.), \textit{Mysterium Liberationis Vol.2}, pp.93-106, begins by noting that “El hombre es pecador” (the human being is a sinner), before moving on to look at structural sin.
“circumspice”, “if you require the poor, look around you”. A definition is unnecessary when confronted by the reality.

Though this is true in as far as it goes, it has advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are that in theory it can lessen the chances of oversimplification or reductionism. The poor cannot be defined away. Moreover, it is evidence that the poor are truly being allowed to set the agenda, that it is the poor who challenge the theologian. The poor here are encountered in their variety and complexity. The disadvantages are perhaps more subtly problematic, touching, not surprisingly on the obverse of the positive. If the poor are so diverse, how does one make any sensible and helpful theological statement? Either, therefore, the theologian must fall into a narrow particularism which says nothing to any other situation, or she or he must choose from among the definitions of the poor, or generalise out of the many encounters with people. In doing this, though, the poor automatically cease to be human beings, and become a theoretical construct.

This can lead to a focus, not on who the poor are, but what to do about their problems. The poor person is then identified with his or her poverty alone. For reasons I have suggested in the previous paragraph, there are strategic justifications for this move: if the poor are all around, the challenge is what to do about the immediate, or even longer-term, needs, not in working out a definition which will be all-inclusive. However, the danger remains that in acting like this the actual needs of actual people and actual communities are passed over too quickly. In addition, it would seem to go against the general methodological principles of liberation theology, that the starting point should be an analysis of the reality and that what needs changing are structures, not simply a papering over of cracks. The challenge, too often, is not from the poor to the theologian, but from the theologian to the poor.

That there may be some justification to this analysis would seem to be borne out by the investigation of a number of anthropological studies of the church in Brazil, especially the relationship between the solutions offered by the CEBs (base ecclesial communities), frequently at some level inspired by liberation theology, and Pentecostal or neo-Pentecostal churches. The repeated findings of these studies and the demographic data indicate a growing preference among the very poorest strata of society for the Pentecostal churches over the model espoused by the liberation theologians. Certainly one does not have to conclude from this that liberation theology has therefore failed in its aims, and indeed some studies have indicated the profound effect that liberation theology has had on a

---

314 The exact relationship between CEBs and liberation theology is complex, and it is not straightforward to say which influences which. Nevertheless, it is true that many liberation theologians have found inspiration in the CEBs, and that much of the CEB methodology has been inherited from or shared with liberation theology.
number of crucial areas of social life in Brazil. Nevertheless, there are indications that the poorest people are responding more positively to the immediacy and disruption favoured by Pentecostalism over against the continuity and transformation supported by liberation theology. Finally, I looked at one, in some ways fairly typical, attack on liberation theology, which suggests that it fails the poor because it tries to force on to them inappropriate, indeed since non-biblical, ultimately non-existent theological ideas and categories.

This investigation leads me to the following question. What sort of relationship really exists between the theology of liberation and the poor? In naming the poor as the privileged of God, and thus as the starting point for reflection on God (theology), has liberation theology really taken the poor seriously as themselves, and allowed them to make God present? In order to address this problem, I will undertake first one further analysis of liberation theology, this time of its use of the concept of idolatry. I do this for two reasons. It deepens the understanding of the concept of the poor which we began in this chapter, and it does so, moreover, in strict theological terms by relating the option for the poor to the option for life which the creator God made in creating the world and which was definitively pronounced by the raising of Jesus from the dead.

As I ask this question, I will also be bearing in mind liberation theology's own relationship to idolatry and ideology. My point is that liberation theology at least runs the danger of idolising the poor. In his Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius begins by reminding the director that she or he should always make the best interpretation of any remark made by the person doing the Exercises. This principle seems to me a fair one to adopt here. Thus I will at least assume that in general liberation theologians do not idolise the poor. However, given that the possibility is clearly there, the interesting question will be what it is in their methodology that prevents them from doing so.

This question will take me away, in the third chapter, from direct debate with liberation theology. I will first go back more than 1200 years to eighth

---

315 As Louis-Marie Chauvet, Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence, (trans. Patrick Madigan SJ, Sister Madeleine Beaumont), Collegeville, Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 1995 (orig.1987) has forcefully argued in the field of sacramental theology, the presence of God is always also indicative of the absence of God. Thus here I assume that the absence of God – in the practice of injustice, exploitation, oppression – is also indicative of the presence of a God who hears the cry of his people and acts, just as the presence of God – for example, in the poor – is also indicative of the absence of God in a world which is still on the journey to full union with the Godhead.

316 Spiritual Exercises 22

317 A more critical approach and experience would rather suggest that not all are wholly successful in avoiding this temptation. I think that most theologians do manage to allow the poor to remain Other, but this is not always the case with pastoral agents, priests, religious, etc., who are inspired by the ideas of liberation theology, without always having sufficient patience and subtilety. See on this Susin and Hammes, “A Teologia da Libertação”, p.281
century Byzantium and the Iconoclast Controversy, where for the only time the Church in Council considered what is or is not legitimate about the iconic. I will look at how the Second Council of Nicaea permitted us to view the material as iconic and revelatory of the transcendent, whilst simultaneously being so involved in ideological battles with the Iconoclasts that it was unable to phrase its belief in a non-totalitarian way.
The problem of totality, linked with that of alterity, leads me to discuss Emmanuel Levinas, who led the way in reflection on this theme. Levinas will also allow me to consider how the poor can be allowed to exist both as irreducible individuals, but, precisely as such, as people in community with others. In this regard, I consider one of the theologians in Latin America who has most worked with Levinas, Enrique Dussel, considering whether he has really taken on board all the possibilities present in Levinas for liberation theology.

Finally, in this third chapter, I will turn to Jean-Luc Marion. Marion will provide me with a language for analysing concepts to see if they are what he calls iconic or idolatrous. Can the poor in liberation theology lead to God, as liberation theologians desire, or do they become an idol, so that the concentration on the poor effectively removes God from the picture? Marion also furnishes me with one possible way of talking about the role of the theologian in relation to the poor, as l’adonné, the one who receives, is gifted by the reception of the iconic irreducibility of the other.

Since my question is whether liberation theology itself has any tools to deal with or help avoid the potential problem of treating the poor as idols rather than icons, I turn in my final major chapter to the theological method of Clodovis Boff. First I will present his methodology, and some critiques of it, and then some of his subsequent works. I will then examine to what extent his dialectical method can successfully meet the challenge of relating theory and praxis, to the degree that liberation theology, whilst maintaining that the poor are indeed privileged, can allow the poor genuinely to supply the agenda for theologising. I finish with a conclusion, in which I bring together Boff’s methodology and Levinas and Marion, looking at the implications for liberation theology and very briefly some implications especially of the application of Marion’s idea of iconicity and idolatry to other areas of theology.

---

This question would be one way of reading the arguments of people such as Muskus or the experiences reported in some of the anthropological work.