

RAÚL E. ZEGARRA 

The Preferential Option of the Poor: Liberation Theology, Pentecostalism, and the New Forms of Sacralization

Abstract

This paper argues that the alleged demise of liberation theology is the product of an oversimplification of the movement's development,—one that depends on a church-focused understanding of the process of secularization. Yet, a different interpretation of this process may allow us to see secularization as a process capable of eliciting new forms of sacralization. My contention is that liberation theology has remained active in civil society, especially through faith-based organizations not supported by the Catholic Church. I argue that these civil-society organizations have become new sacred spaces that address the needs of the most vulnerable. To warrant these claims, I present a comparative study of the parallel development of liberation theology and Pentecostalism in Latin America, particularly in the case of Peru. Since both movements focus on the most disenfranchised and thus may compete for the same public, attention to the success or failure of their strategies will help to elucidate the current status of liberation theology.

Keywords: liberation theology; Pentecostalism; secularization; sacralization; Latin American Christianity.

LATIN AMERICAN LIBERATION theology received a great deal of scholarly attention during the 1970s and 1980s. Yet interest in this social movement started to wane in the 1990s, due to the perceived demise of progressive Catholicism in the region and the undeniable growth of Evangelical Christianity, especially Pentecostalism. But is this perception of a demise warranted?

This paper argues that the alleged demise of liberation theology did not occur, and that the perception that it did is a misconception resulting from an oversimplified account of the movement's development.

I

Raúl E. ZEGARRA, The University of Chicago/Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú [rzegarra@uchicago.edu].

European Journal of Sociology, 64, 1 (2023), pp. 1–30—0003-9756/23/0000-900\$07.50 per art + \$0.10 per page
© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of European Journal of Sociology.
This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited [doi: 10.1017/S0003975623000036].

The perceived demise of liberation theology depends on a particular understanding of the process of secularization, one in which a teleological and church-focused understanding of the fate of religion leads to the progressive disappearance of organized religion. Yet, a different interpretation of the process of secularization may allow us to see it as one that elicits new religious configurations and, therefore, one that makes new forms of sacralization possible. My contention is that liberation theology has remained active in civil society, especially through faith-based organizations not supported by the Catholic Church and through secular organizations. I argue that these civil-society organizations have become new sacred spaces that address the needs of the most vulnerable. To warrant these claims, I present a comparative study of the parallel development of liberation theology and Pentecostalism in Latin America, particularly in the case of Peru. Since both movements focus on the most disenfranchised and thus may compete for the same public (hence, the option *of* the poor), attention to the success or failure of their strategies will help to elucidate the current status of liberation theology in the context of the allegation of its demise.¹

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I briefly outline my approach to the secularization debate to contextualize the ways in which focusing attention on the process of secularization casts new light on liberation theology and Pentecostalism. Second, I examine the social, political, and ecclesial conditions that led to the formation of these two contemporary movements, paying special attention to their social ethics and their relationship with politics. Third, I examine the social, political, and ecclesial changes that have taken place in Latin America since the 1990s and how they affected the distribution of religious belonging in the region. Here, I start considering the expansion of Pentecostalism and the possible correlative decline of liberation theology. Lastly, I turn to some examples of liberation theology's shift from a church-focused model to one in which different civil-society organizations take a central role in the liberation struggle. I argue that this change of strategy is most likely here to stay, and that it should reframe the question of the demise of liberation theology. Further, this change of strategy should pose questions about both the future of social-justice organizations within Catholicism and that of institutional Catholicism as a whole.

¹ To my knowledge, there have been few comparative studies of this type, and even fewer addressing theories of secularization. For a few recent exceptions without reference to

secularization, see Hartch [2014], Wingeier-Rayo [2011], Trejo [2009], and Zalpa and Offerdal [2008]. For older studies, see Rolim [1980] and Mariz [1994].

Secularization: Social Process and Analytical Tool

Liberation theology and Pentecostalism are both a product of the *process* of secularization and a challenge to some *theories* of secularization. That is, while liberation theology and Pentecostalism are the results of social, political, and cultural transitions generally understood as emblematic of the process of secularization, they also challenge certain preconceptions about what that process of secularization is supposed to look like.

Several comprehensive surveys of the history and current state of the secularization debate have been published in recent years [Gorski and Altinordu 2008; Joas 2014], so it is not my goal to revisit the issue here. My aim in this section is to show that some understanding of the debate is crucial if we are to elucidate the development of liberation theology and Pentecostalism, and, thus, the present state of the former.

In agreement with the general thrust of the arguments in Joas [2014], Gorski and Altinordu [2008], Taylor [2007], Casanova [1994], and the pioneering work of Martin [1978], I approach secularization as a multifaceted and historically grounded process. For the purposes of this article, I will use the concept of “secularization” as a multilayered analytical tool whose core explicative power lies in the category of *differentiation*, although not without caveats. If we typologically establish a three-tiered approach to the process of secularization, the complexity and multifaceted nature of the process becomes evident. If secularization comprises the *differentiation* of spheres in society (church, state, and economy, for instance), the *privatization* of religious practices, and the general *decline* of religion, it is apparent that these three aspects of the process have not simultaneously taken place in most parts of the globe [Casanova 1994; Joas 2014; Martin 1978; 1993; 2015a]. This is true in the world regions shaped by Christianity, but the matter becomes much more complicated when we examine the non-Western world [see Asad 2003; Casanova 2008].

Thus, I find little basis for the so-called “secularization thesis” [see Joas 2014: 9–21 for a thorough discussion]. Secularization is inadequately construed as the progressive and almost inevitable path to the disappearance of religion due to the gains provided by the processes of modernization, democratization, and greater access to social goods. Even if the “secularization thesis” is presented with great nuance and important revisions, it remains hardly defensible as a teleological and uniform process. For instance, the introduction of existential security [Norris and

Inglehart 2011: 4–5] as a variable to predict the persistence or the lack of religiosity in a given country has proven problematic. It is in fact unclear that higher existential security translates into lower religious affiliation and vice versa, with the United States still standing out as the permanent challenge to the theory. Moreover, the reliability of this approach is further complicated when we notice that the existential-security variable has not been applied consistently across countries. Existential security stands for primary goods (food, water, etc.) when applied to lower-income countries and for higher-order goods (predictability, risk prevention, etc.) when applied to higher-income countries [see Gorski and Altınordu 2008: 64–65].

But even if we focus on European, formerly confessional Christian societies—often considered highly secularized—formal estimates of secularization vary depending on how survey questions are constructed and on the data-collection methodology [*Ibid.*]. Further, when it comes to the differentiation of church and state, it is evident that this process has not taken place, *sensu stricto*, everywhere. Several countries still embrace the model of state churches, even if these nations are modern and democratic [Gorski and Altınordu 2008; Casanova 2008]. Needless to say, the growth of immigrant and non-Christian populations in many European countries has further complicated the picture in regard to both the reality and the ideal of the differentiation of spheres [see Bowen 2007].

Considering these issues and using comparative analyses that took him beyond formerly Christian countries, Casanova [2008] revised some elements of his emphasis on differentiation as the “valid core” of the process of secularization: it is not only that decline and privatization are not universalizable trends, but that differentiation itself is not uniform and is being constantly contested. However, differentiation remains a very real process and a valuable analytical tool, if used with nuance.

Therefore, I suggest that we take a cautious approach to the study of the process of secularization, placing stress on that which we know with relative certainty. First, the assertion that religion was destined to disappear has proven untenable. Not even in Europe can we sustain this claim without adding innumerable nuances that render this assertion almost meaningless. Second, even if we confine ourselves to Christianity, there is evidence that most religious individuals and communities have not taken the route of a radical privatization of their faith [Casanova 1994; 2008; Martin 2002]. In the United States, in Latin America, and in some European countries, religious people take part in the public

sphere both through the public presence of religious rituals and symbols and by publicly advocating, often on religious grounds, for changes in legislation, policy, and values. Lastly, it is fair to say that even if we revise the notion that differentiation is the “valid core” of the theory of secularization, this dimension of the process still has force.

Even if the notion of a state church seems to contradict the validity of differentiation, the closer we look, the more we see that the contemporary version of the state church is nothing like the confessional state of yore. Indeed, the Western nations that have a state-church model do not embrace it to the extent of creating a major challenge to the idea that religious institutions and the state have significantly different functions [Casanova 2008]. Undeniably, there are other areas where the differentiation thesis shows its limits—the public funding of religious education or the judicial definition of what counts as a valid religious exception, for instance [Sullivan 2005]—but it is still hard to deny that a serious process of differentiation has taken place. That is, in most formerly confessional Christian nations we have seen—to different degrees, for sure—a process in which the interests of the former or current state churches (Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, etc.) have become progressively differentiated from the interests of the state’s public policy. This is not to say, of course, that the interests of religious communities and the state cannot overlap. But if they do, it is no longer due to the power of an established church. Rather, it happens through the election of state representatives who produce policy that reflects the religious interests of the populace.

The process of differentiation historically coincides with the rise of the notion of freedom of conscience and its progressive codification in Western legislation [Zagorin 2003; Nussbaum 2008; Shiffrin 2009]. Without a strong church establishment—or with its progressive disappearance—a greater plurality of belief systems became more tolerable or even positively welcomed over time. Initially, this mostly meant a limited plurality of Christian denominations. Eventually, however, this process produced a wider number of religious options in many Western countries. Further, it created—in the West, at least—a context in which having religious faith was just *an option* in many societies, and in some places a minoritarian one [Taylor 2007; Joas 2014].

My point is that *this* aspect of secularization, i.e., differentiation (with the revisions and nuances noted above), does lead to varying degrees of *pluralization*, some of which offer multiple religious options without a corresponding lack of religiosity (the United States, for instance), while in others, active religious faith is infrequent and is only one among many options (most European countries).

In the Latin American case, the process of what I would like to call “differentiation-pluralization” has led to what Martin interprets as a major *religious* reconfiguration: from a Catholic monopoly to varying degrees of Catholic–Protestant shares of the religious arena [2015a: 250].² Now, what matters most for the purposes of this paper is to understand *how* this process of religious reconfiguration has taken place. Since I have established that the process of differentiation-pluralization is not uniform, I now shift to the specifics of the Latin American case. I argue that secularization understood as a process of differentiation-pluralization creates the conditions for religious reconfigurations and room for new experiences of sacralization [Joas 2013; 2016; 2021].

The Latin American Mixed Pattern: Differentiation-Pluralization

As noted, the process of secularization varies depending on the specific sociopolitical conditions of each region and nation. In the case of what we now call Latin America, the colonial presence of Spain and Portugal played the most decisive role in terms of the process of differentiation-pluralization. Following Martin [1978; 1993], we can think about Latin American as an amended extension of the pattern of secularization that unfolded within the colonial powers that invaded the region in the 1500s.

In places like France, Spain, and Portugal, the compounded reaction to the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution gradually led to a zero-sum confrontation of pro- and anti-Catholic world views. As Martin notes, “the Baroque autocracies eliminate substantial religious dissent and forces build up within the system towards a revolution with an explicit secular ideology. Such revolutionary explosions become endemic, and religion as such is frequently a political issue” [1978: 6]. Further, when the anti-Catholic and anti-clerical forces triumph, they often do so while eroding institutional adherence to the church and religious belief *both together*. This is what Martin calls the *Latin Pattern* of secularization, in which institutional differentiation also leads to privatization and decline of religious faith.

² In this paper I will use “Protestant” to refer to the “mainline” or “historical” Protestant denominations (Lutherans, Calvinists, Episcopalians, Methodists, etc.), which were the first to arrive in Latin America. I will use “Evangelicals” to refer to the revival groups that often separated from mainline

Protestantism to form new congregations. In Latin America, most non-Catholic Christians have a Pentecostal background or leanings. Hence, I use “Evangelical” and “Pentecostal” interchangeably, unless I am discussing specific features of Pentecostalism.

In contrast, the almost-400-year total monopoly of the Catholic Church in the Latin American colonies produced a very different pattern of secularization. When the Protestant challenge emerged in the 19th century—and much more clearly in the second half of the 20th century—it did so rather timidly, from the margins, and always as a minoritarian threat. Hence, it never had the power to mobilize the masses towards radical confrontation. However, more decisively, Protestantism became a challenge to the Catholic monopoly *centuries after* the vicious circles of violence witnessed in the European experience. Protestantism really flourished in Latin America when the basic structures of democratic living—even if they were weak, and always under threat from military coups—had already become part of the lived experience of most people in the region.

Therefore, the possibility of radical religious confrontation was precluded by the new social and political conditions. This led to the formation of a *Mixed Pattern* of secularization, whereby a sizeable (Protestant) minority peacefully coexists with a still-dominant religious and cultural (Catholic) majority [Martin 2015b: 218].³ In this Mixed Pattern, secularization takes place as differentiation-pluralization, but without privatization and decline of religious faith.

From Mainline Protestantism to Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism

As noted, the more serious incursions of Protestantism in Latin America start in the 19th century. Its slow but steady spread correlates with the progressive erosion of the prerogatives of the Catholic Church, especially after the wars of independence. It is not a coincidence that during the time of warfare in Latin America, British assistance to the pro-independence parties was significant, both ideologically and militarily. Partly, this was a means of exacting revenge on the Spaniards for helping the North American colonists to gain independence from Britain. But it was also a reflection of a more general clash between Iberian and “Anglo” civilizations and their respective hegemonic agendas [Martin 1993: 9–11].

British assistance introduced ideas from “Anglo” civilizations, which were much welcomed by the independentist elites as a way to bring peace and democracy and counter the alleged backwardness of centuries of

³ Yet recent surveys suggest that in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras, Catholics and Protestants may have reached the point

of sharing the religious market almost equally [PEW RESEARCH CENTER 2014].

Spanish rule. However, soon after the independentists' victories, the axis of this geopolitical clash turned towards the United States. The hegemony of the United States was rapidly established, first in the region—after military victories over Mexico and Spain—and then around the globe. By the end of the 19th century, “Anglo” civilizations started to be represented not by Britain, but by the United States—which had an impressive range of influence.

The hegemonic vocation of the United States, its “manifest destiny,” was justified by Latin American liberal politicians as a sign of progress. Many among the Latin American elites—especially in Mexico—welcomed US-American culture, and Protestantism with it, as part of a crusade for progress and democracy [Martin 1993: 93ff.; Hartch 2014: 22ff.].

But what were the values that these geopolitical changes introduced to Latin America? What kind of Protestant ethos was brought into the region and how did it develop there?

The Latin American Protestant Ethic

This is not the place to trace a comprehensive history of Protestantism in Latin America, a task that has been accomplished by several scholars [Stoll 1990; Martin 1993]. Rather, I would like to underscore the religious and political factors that today shape Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism, the most important forms of Protestant Christianity in the region, so that the contrast between them and liberation theology becomes clear. Moreover, this contrast will allow us to elucidate *whether* liberation theology is in the decline, and if so, *whether* this decline is connected to the growth of Pentecostalism.

Contemporary Latin American Pentecostalism is the direct inheritor of movements of Protestant revival in the United States that called for people's conversion, commonly known as Great Awakenings. In the 19th century, the most important denomination in the United States was Methodism. The revivals originating within Methodist quarters later became the most decisive influence in the expansion of Protestantism in Latin America [Robbins 2004: 119–120].

The first feature of Methodism worth noting is that, even in its British iteration, it was a movement of *dissent* in which religion shifted away from the core structures of society—especially the political realm—towards the cultural realm [Martin 1993: 22]. The main task of the Christian

believer, therefore, was personal sanctification, which, in turn, led to the sanctification of society. Methodists, together with other religious minorities in Britain, experienced first-hand the oppressive consequences of the alliance between the Church of England and the state. Therefore, Methodism's second key feature is the rejection of the corruption of power and politics, while focusing instead on *spiritual holiness* or *sanctification*. Thus, Methodists emphasized "the availability of grace to all, a millennial hope, and an intense search after 'scriptural holiness'" [Martin 1993: 28].

In the more pluralistic context of the United States, this quest for holiness coupled with a disposition towards dissent led to both revival and division. In the second half of the 19th century, different "holiness" movements arose among Methodist communities in the United States. Holy dancing, laughter, and speaking in tongues—all understood as manifestations of the "baptism in the Holy Spirit"—became common features of this revival. Pentecostalism emerged from these Methodist "holiness" groups. It took the "baptism in the Holy Spirit" especially seriously and understood speaking in tongues as a necessary form of evidence of such transformative experiences [Robbins 2004: 120].

Despite the "enthusiastic" origins of Methodism, the godly hysteria of the holiness movement disturbed the Methodist establishment [Martin 1993: 28–29]. Methodist leaders were particularly worried about blurring denominational boundaries. The break finally occurred in the early 20th century, during the famous Azusa Street Revival of 1906. It is this event that most scholars identify as the birth of Pentecostalism as a distinct religious movement.

From this brief outline of what I call the "revival-dissent inheritance", I draw three important conclusions. First, that the revivalism of Pentecostalism has an inherent potential for schism. Indeed, new *voluntary* associations, or "sects", may form in it periodically, constituted by individuals who allege that they have experienced an awakening or *new birth* from the dormant faith of the originating group [see Troeltsch 1960: 2, 993, for his typology of sects]. Second, that this potential for schism is further kindled in the struggle to make churches truly local or indigenous. This is what happened with the US-American revivals of Methodism vis-à-vis those of the British Methodists. A similar process happened in Latin America in the 20th century, this time with locals gaining independence from the missionaries and churches from the United States [Martin 1993: 31ff]. Third, that the formation of new groups overlaps with differences in social status. The revivals are the "fiery" spiritual reaction of marginalized groups to the "coldness" of the

more established and educated classes. It should come as no surprise that Pentecostalism has mostly grown among the poor and people with little access to formal education—although this by no means implies that Pentecostalism is limited to people of low socio-economic status, as the growth of middle- and upper-class Neo-Pentecostal churches shows [Martin 1993: 30ff.; Ihrke-Buchroth 2016; Pérez Guadalupe 2019: 34–36, 45–51].

Before moving on, it is crucial to stress one additional element of continuity between Methodism and Pentecostalism. I have already noted the tendency to split and form new voluntary associations, the search for holiness, and the scepticism towards politics. One additional and major line of continuity comes from the Methodist interest in networking and, more generally, in living a “methodic” life. From its inception, Methodism developed itinerant networks that provided economic assistance and resources to the members of the Methodist churches to enable them to organize themselves, especially in the labour market. These networks were never intended to be political organizations, but they gained political relevance over time. The point is that these networks provided a clear “expression of a new social interest”, whereby religion was not merely about spiritual practices but also had a lot to do with forms of social cooperation [Martin 1993: 33]. In this crucial regard, Pentecostalism did not break with Methodism at all.

What matters here, as I will show shortly, is that Latin American Pentecostalism inherited this focus on proto-political social cooperation but also the initial “enthusiasm” associated with the baptism in the Holy Spirit that Methodism had lost. Interestingly, though, despite Pentecostalism’s general distrust of the political and general focus on personal transformation, Pentecostals have become increasingly engaged with politics over the last few decades [Pérez Guadalupe 2019].

Like their Methodist forerunners, Pentecostals are also focused on individual sanctification. They are born-again Christians, saved from the power of sin through the fire of the Spirit that was brought to humanity by Jesus Christ. However, being saved from the power of sin has very important practical consequences that affect how we relate to each other. Put differently, despite the Pentecostal emphasis on “microsocial change” [Wingeier-Rayo 2011: 76ff.], Pentecostalism’s reformation inevitably spills over into the political realm. When one has experienced the salvific fire of God’s power, wouldn’t it make sense to share it with all nations, like Jesus’ apostles did in the original Pentecost narrated in the Christian Bible?

In this sense, the Pentecostal project is, ultimately, the full Christianization of society. When conditions are not favourable, though, Pentecostals restrict themselves to the creation of a “substitute society” [Martin 1993: 258] or an alternative “Christian citizenship” [O’Neill 2010: 200ff]. After all, sin always corrupts society, including the political realm. Therefore, the “substitute society” approach may make more theological and strategic sense. But what if favourable conditions do arise and the goal of Christianizing society seems more feasible? Political opportunity may lead to new theological responses.

In recent decades, and especially in the last few years, in the United States and in Latin America we have seen a tendency towards what we may call a model of “theocratic reconstructionism” or “religious conquest” [see Pérez Vela 2016 and Pérez Guadalupe 2019, respectively; Gorski and Perry 2022, for the case of the United States]; that is, the use of the democratic system to accumulate political power in key positions in all branches of government to advance a Christian agenda. There are, of course, other forms of Evangelical presence in Latin America, which defend democracy and social justice on Christian grounds. For instance, the project of *misión integral*—an Evangelical variant of liberation theology—has for decades advocated a Christian discipleship that integrates devotion and social, structural concerns [see Chao Romero 2020: 154–162]. But these groups of progressive Evangelicals are a minority.

In contrast, the reconstructionist model is a serious and growing threat to democracy in Latin America, but is still relatively weak due to the minority status of Evangelicals in most countries and the lack of a “confessional vote” in the region [Pérez Guadalupe 2019: 56–58]. The Bolsonaro regime in Brazil, however, may be an example of a qualitative leap in the political influence of Evangelicals that may affect other experiences in the area. But I will return to these matters shortly. Now I turn to the Catholic side of the spectrum.

From Catholic Monopoly to Voluntary Disestablishment

The Latin American wars of independence, the slow emergence of proto-democratic states, and the subsequent development of different degrees of religious toleration changed the social location of the Catholic Church in the turn from the 19th to the 20th century. The almost-absolute Catholic monopoly over all dimensions of culture started weakening, opening some doors to liberal ideas, many of which were the result

of British and US-American influence, including the variants of Protestant Christianity discussed in the previous section.

However, this story will appear too one-sided if we do not consider the Catholic Church's own agency and willingness to reconsider its role in Latin American society. The most influential ecclesial event in this regard was the Second Vatican Council [or Vatican II; 1962–1965] and Pope John XXIII's invitation to the Church to commence a process of *aggiornamento* or “updating.” For our purposes, the most important accomplishment of Vatican II was its radically new proposal about how the Church should relate to the world, an approach that shifted from the Church's long-standing defence of confessional Catholic states to the full embrace of democracy. Casanova has referred to this phenomenon as the “voluntary disestablishment” of the Catholic Church [Casanova 2018].

Some scholars question how “voluntary” this process was [Martin 2018], and not without reason. Indeed, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Latin America resisted disestablishment in the decades that followed the wars of independence and some of the social revolutions that followed them. However, when it became clear that the battle for confessional states was lost, the Catholic hierarchy could have simply tolerated the new democratic developments without affirming them. This was not the case. Vatican II was much more than mere toleration; it was a radical affirmation of the value of the secular world, the separation of church and state, the salvific power of other religions, and the value of democracy and human rights, among other issues. A qualitative leap took place in the second half of the 20th century that cannot be explained solely based on exogenous factors.

Further, the real growth of Evangelical Christianity in Latin America—especially in the form of Pentecostalism—only starts *after* the Catholic developments just noted. This growth correlates with the Latin American implementation of the values of Vatican II through the decisive Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín, Colombia (1968). Medellín, of course, was one of the milestones in the development and institutional implementation of liberation theology [Smith 1991]. But it was also the expression of a major transformation of Latin American Catholicism in which the Catholic hierarchy, officially and decisively, shifted its pastoral and theological focus. That focus turned more than ever towards civil society and left behind—for the most part—the attempt to regain the role of an established religion. For these reasons, Casanova aptly notes that in the second half of the 20th century, Latin American Christianity went through a “double reformation” or a process of “parallel reformations”; that is, “the

emergence and growth of a Pentecostal form of Reformed Protestant Christianity and the reformation of Catholic Christianity” [Casanova 2018: 88]. In turn, these parallel reformations led to the process of differentiation-pluralization I have described in previous sections of this article.

The Latin American Catholic Ethic

Key to this process of differentiation-pluralization was the emergence of liberation theology. The theological and ecclesial momentum of Vatican II quickly led the Latin American bishops to organize themselves and their church. The above-mentioned conference of Medellín (1968) was the most crucial result at the hierarchical level.

The Medellín bishops denounced structural injustice, speaking directly about the causes of poverty, economic systems of oppression, and the complicity of the church in the sustenance of these systems [see Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops 1990]. The bishops also recognized the importance of the basic ecclesial communities, and provided resources for their growth, a significant turn and move towards the empowerment of the laity. Central to the development of these communities was the method of “consciousness raising” that theologians and catechists used to organize and mobilize the poor while reading the Bible and reflecting on reality [Smith 1991: 130–132].

In sum, Medellín envisioned a church in which Christians commit to the struggle for social transformation: a struggle to bring justice to all, but especially to the poor. Later, at the bishops’ conference of Puebla, Mexico [1979], the bishops defined this new vision as the “preferential option for the poor”, which became the motto of liberation theology [Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops 1990: 254–258].

Of course, none of this should be taken to suggest that liberation theology and its preferential option for the poor became the dominant current of Catholicism in the region. It is well documented that quickly after Medellín, a backlash started [Smith 1991: 125–233]. For some of its critics, liberation theology was an unredeemable Marxist politicization of the Christian faith that had to be eliminated for the sake of religious orthodoxy. For other critics, liberation theology was not a threat to the Christian *faith* per se, but to their own power and prerogatives as members of the ecclesial and social elites who were accustomed to rule without challenge. Thus, liberation theologians became an uncomfortable presence that—for some—had to be eradicated.

Therefore, despite some important victories for the liberationist wing, Puebla was a less radical conference than Medellín. And by the following conference, held in Santo Domingo in 1992, a solid resistance towards liberation theology had consolidated among the bishops and the clergy. Nonetheless, as we will see shortly, the ecclesial vision of liberation theology did permeate Latin American Catholicism to a significant degree. However, after the backlash, it did so—for the most part—outside the official ecclesial channels and structures. Interestingly, though, we could say that this was, in fact, a natural development ensuing from the voluntary disestablishment discussed in the previous subsection.

The backlash on the part of the Catholic hierarchy—partly set in motion by the appointment of key conservative bishops during the papacy of John Paul II—was a sign of resistance to the movement towards disestablishment. Acknowledging this conservative turn, the faithful—and some bishops, priests, and religious—decided to keep working for the most disenfranchised, but they did so—more than ever—from within civil society. They formed non-profits, popular education institutes, magazines, and so forth. All of these initiatives were shaped by their Catholic faith and by a liberationist orientation but were now *independent* from the institutional control of the church.

We may speak of a “double” or “two-fold” disestablishment. The first disestablishment challenged and ultimately eradicated the idea that the best way to promote the values of Catholicism was the model of the confessional Catholic state, of an established religion. Even though this shift faced resistance, overall it has been accepted by the hierarchy and the laity and is now taken for granted by most of the faithful.

The second disestablishment challenges—and perhaps will also eradicate?—the idea that the best way to promote the values of Catholicism is through the established, institutional Catholic Church. Indeed, all around the world, in survey after survey, we witness the gap between official church teachings on sexuality, family planning, same-sex relations, and abortion—to mention a few obvious cases—and the beliefs of most lay Catholics [Diamant 2020; Fahmy 2020; Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir 2022]. This has led to the formation of communities—sometimes sponsored by nuns, priests, and other church-affiliated people—that attempt to live out their Catholic values without the constraints of the institutional church.

We may think of these groups as more informal networks—“networks of agape”, perhaps [Taylor 2007: 282; Joas 2014: 132–133]—that are deeply Catholic in their convictions and their theology, yet depart on certain matters from established Catholic teachings, structures, and

responses to current problems. These Catholics take this approach because they believe that some of those teachings, structures, and responses conflict with fundamental Catholic values, values like that of agape. Agape, that special kind of love supposedly advanced by Christians of all kinds, is expected to be characterized by respect, kindness, benevolence, and solidarity towards one's neighbour. But many individuals, especially women and queer and poor people, do not find in the Catholic Church—or in many other churches, for that matter—the affirmation and support they need. Many of them have been turning away from the established Catholic Church, but not from their Catholicism (see Starks 2013 for in-depth interviews that elaborate on the predicament of progressive/liberal Catholics).

In my view, this second form of disestablishment is key to understanding the new forms of sacralization to which I referred earlier in this piece. What I propose is to examine the experience of liberation theology, paying attention to the Peruvian case, as an example of the formation of some of these alternative Catholic networks. But before that, we should further examine some of the changes that have taken place in the liberation-theology movement in the last few decades and how those changes were received by the Evangelical front.

Alternative Models of Sociopolitical Change: Catholic–Evangelical Dynamics at the Turn of the Century

Liberation theology in Latin America emerges at the crossroads of two parallel reformations. On the one hand, the process of voluntary disestablishment of the Catholic Church; on the other, the growth of Evangelical Christianity in the region. Indeed, these are parallel processes insofar as they have their own independent causes. However, these processes also influence each other. In part, the growth of Evangelicals is explained by the less antagonistic position and more ecumenical disposition adopted by the Catholic Church in recent times. In turn, this greater ecumenism reflects the influence of the pluralism of the denominational system in which Evangelical Christianity developed.

The Contingency of Growth: The Risks and Opportunities of Church Hierarchy

But there are some additional factors that we must take into account if we are to gain an understanding of the growth of Evangelical Christianity

and the apparent decline of the communities associated with liberation theology. The initial success of liberation theology was largely a result of the combination of political opportunity, organizational strength, and the emergence of an insurgent consciousness among many Latin Americans in the 1960s and 1970s. Without necessarily representing the majority of the faithful or the clergy, the bishops and theologians present at Medellín were capable of persuading the majority of their colleagues that a social-justice-oriented pastoral programme was the right response to the challenges of their day. Seizing this opportunity and using the organizational strength of the Catholic Church, they were able to institutionalize liberation theology; first, through the documents of Medellín and, second and more importantly, through several organizations that warranted the sustainability and growth of the Medellín charter.

But *precisely* for these reasons, the development of liberation theology became highly contingent on the role of progressive theologians and bishops. Soon enough, concern among conservative and moderates, who together represented the majority of Latin American bishops, started to emerge. Already in 1972, at the episcopal meeting in Sucre, Bolivia, the progressive bishops experienced a backlash that significantly diminished their control of the bishops' governing body, known as CELAM (Conferencia Episcopal Latinoamericana; Conference of Latin American Bishops). The election of John Paul II in 1978 and his fear of the politicization of the church furthered the backlash, as multiple conservative bishops were appointed in the region. By 1992, when the bishops' conference of Santo Domingo took place, liberation theology had lost almost all its *institutional* support in the Catholic hierarchy. Without access to the resources of CELAM or the backing of powerful and charismatic bishops, a movement that heavily depended on those structures of support started to see the end of its initial growth period.

These observations give us a preliminary hypothesis regarding the alleged stagnation of liberation theology: indeed, this *apparent* stagnation may be explained by the backlash and constraints emerging from the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. With fewer resources and organizational support available, the work done among the poor weakened, and was often reduced to the administration of the sacraments. In turn, Evangelical Christianity, especially Pentecostalism, started growing in many of the areas that had previously been served by the clergy and pastoral agents associated with liberation theology. In those areas, Pentecostalism not only became the main provider of pastoral care, but also of networks of economic and personal support [Lernoux 1989].

From Political Violence and Scarcity to Basic Democracy and Prosperity

The emergence and development of liberation theology overlaps with the beginning of different forms of political upheaval in Latin America. Most notably, it overlaps with the appearance of several right-wing dictatorships that took over the majority of states in the region, starting with Brazil in 1964. In this sense, the consciousness raising that was crucial to the methodology of liberation theology rapidly developed into a form of resistance against not only economically and politically unjust systems, but also flagrantly violent governments. Therefore, the infrastructure that started expanding after Medellín became the basis for movements of resistance and the defence of human rights. The situation became so extreme in some cases that even bishops—most notably Enrique Angelelli (d. 1976), Oscar Romero (d. 1980), and Juan Gerardi (d. 1998)—were murdered by state forces, in an astonishing example of the radical break of the old alliances between church and state.

However, things had started to change by the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. Most countries in Latin America had returned to democracy by that time, and political repression had drastically diminished or ended altogether. Similarly, Latin America's GDP grew consistently from the 1990s onwards, starting a period of relative prosperity and poverty reduction. In a sense, this situation was a victory for liberation theology; but viewed from a different perspective, it was a challenge. Can liberation theology grow in relatively peaceful and prosperous conditions?

At the very least, the change in political and economic conditions made the radicalization of previous decades less appealing or fruitful, which helps explain liberation theology's seeming stagnation [Brooks 1999]. Indeed, this seems to be a pattern: whenever a religious movement stops being politically decisive, membership starts to decline or to fragment into other political forms of expression [Martin 2015b: 15]. Of course, this is not to say that socio-economic conditions in Latin America are ideal or that faith-based social mobilization has ended [see Martínez Andrade 2022]. It simply means, as we will see, that the means to pursue social justice have changed and that the focus of liberationists has shifted (to environmental justice, for instance).

In turn, this pendulum moving from political violence and economic scarcity to basic democratic peace and relative prosperity appears to have favoured Pentecostalism. The Pentecostal version of the Protestant ethic seems to be more suited than the liberationist approach to times of relative progress, particularly in its Neo-Pentecostal form, whereby the

emphasis on “health and wealth” is greater than before [Hartch 2014: 102]. It is not surprising, then, that the discourse of entrepreneurship is now so widespread in Latin America and that in many places the entrepreneurial spirit overlaps with the growth of Pentecostalism. Some among the poor are now less concerned with structural issues and more interested in gaining economic prosperity and social status, usually through the development of small businesses and intra-faith social cooperation. Yet liberation-theology followers were not unaffected by this interest in economic prosperity. In fact, liberationists developed their own form of entrepreneurial spirit.

Indeed, in the context of the political violence that held sway in Latin America prior to the 1990s, many people decided to risk their lives struggling for their basic rights. However, when a certain level of peace and economic progress was reached in the region, the sense of urgency about that struggle diminished. Further, the political scene was changing. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the traditional political parties in the region—and particularly in Peru—started to lose credibility; unions weakened, and militant collective action diminished significantly. Thus, the project of large-scale social change driven by collective struggle and protest became harder to pursue, but also seemed to have less capacity to achieve change in the new sociopolitical conditions [Brooks 1999]. For many, the struggles of daily survival were already sufficiently dramatic. A grand-scale social project appeared beyond reach [Martin 1993: 118; O’Neill 2010: 76ff.].

However, it would be a mistake to interpret the decline in progressive Catholic participation in social mobilization as a sign of the decline of liberation theology [Brooks 1999]. Such an interpretation conflates the *goal* of achieving social justice with the *means* necessary to do so [Brooks 1999: 73]. Further, it construes liberation theology too narrowly. Instead, it makes more sense to conceive of liberation theology—even in the 1960s and 1970s—holistically, with different forms of manifestation [Mackin 2010]. As Brooks argues, it is precisely the fact that the organizational forms of the progressive Catholicism of the 1960s and 1970s did not persist that allowed liberation theology to persevere [1999: 74]. Instead, from the 1990s on, the goals of liberation theology were *recast* to provide alternatives for the poor in a context of greater ecclesial hostility but also greater economic opportunity [*Ibid.*: 70].

As Brooks’ study shows, “this may even include engagement in technical training, forging alliances with multinational corporations, or sponsoring entrepreneurship as means of advancing Catholic doctrine” [*Ibid.*: 72–73]. Indeed, the social, political, and economic transformations of the

last three decades created many obstacles for the grassroots organizing of the 1960s and 1970s, but these transformations also generated new opportunities. Now the focus has turned towards organizations fostering human development through concrete projects with aims such as enhancing agriculture, creating sources of clean water, or fostering democratic citizenship, for example [Brooks 1999; Chamberlain 2019a, 2019c].

In this sense, it appears that followers of liberation theology have focused on microsocioal change in a similar way to Pentecostals, for whom it has been central. But this association could be misleading. The point of coincidence lies on the formation of networks of social cooperation to help the most disenfranchised. Yet liberation-theology adherents in Peru and the region remain committed to macro-social change as well, and to social and political transformation that addresses the causes of poverty and injustice [Chamberlain 2019b]. The focus of Pentecostalism is almost exclusively on individual-level spiritual healing and, especially in its Neo-Pentecostal iteration, it often embraces “prosperity gospel” ideas that do not challenge systemic injustices [see Ihrke-Buchroth 2016; Pérez Guadalupe 2019].

Opposing Views of the Political Process

Indeed, this points towards the most significant difference between Pentecostals and liberation-theology followers in Peru and the region; i.e., their understanding of the political process. For the most part, liberation-theology followers took an approach to social change that presupposed the process of differentiation-pluralization described earlier, a process they embraced as a good in itself. For the disestablishment of the Catholic Church was an opportunity for the values of the Christian message to be disseminated in an inclusive fashion, regardless of people’s own religious affiliations [see Taylor 2011]. Respectful of people’s different religious confessions and world views, liberation-theology supporters advocated social justice *for all*. That was, after all, the whole premise of Vatican II. In the bishops’ words in *Gaudium et spes*: the defence of human dignity, human community, and the meaning of human activity lay the “foundation for the relationship between the Church and the world” [Second Vatican Council 2010: 198].

The Evangelical approach to the political, for the most part, is radically different. Even though the very condition for the growth of Evangelicals in the region was the process of differentiation-pluralization, the goal of the most vocal Evangelical political leaders seems to be to revert this process as much as possible to limit plurality and make society more

uniformly Christian. Thus, a takeover of government through the electoral process is on the agenda of many Evangelical political leaders in the region—even if their success has been quite limited in most cases, with very few presidential victories and significant under-representation in congress [Pérez Guadalupe 2019: 59–130].

The Brazilian experience is, so far, the most obvious example of the theocratic reconstructionist model, but all over Latin America we can observe some milder forms of the same ideals. However, even Brazilian Evangelical voters appeared to be reconsidering their choices in the run-up to the 2022 presidential election. At the time of writing, former President Lula da Silva had had a consistent advantage (10% on average) over the incumbent, President Bolsonaro, for several months and seemed poised to once again run the country [Harrison 2022]. Most importantly, Evangelicals—70% of whom supported Bolsonaro in 2018—appeared to have withdrawn their support for Bolsonaro in large numbers, with polls showing his Evangelical support at only slightly over 40% [Campos Lima 2022; *The Economist* 2022]. In other countries, Evangelicals have neither attained control of government nor have they pursued radical reconstructionist agendas such as that in the Brazilian case. It is still too early to say, but one may argue that the reconstructionist model's lack of success is attributable to the perception that it is too radical. Plus, earlier attempts at “religious conquest” through confessional Evangelical parties in prior decades had failed miserably everywhere in the region [Pérez Guadalupe 2019: 60ff]. A return to some form of religious establishment appears to be too extreme for most people in Latin America, even if a significant portion of the population leans conservative.

But perhaps the most important issue regarding the relationship between faith and politics in Latin America is that the vast majority of religious people remain Catholic. The significant expansion of Evangelical Christianity over the last few decades has not been able to erase 400 years of Catholic influence. In fact, quite often the attempt to eradicate Catholic culture (in the form of devotion to the Virgin Mary and patron saints, religious feasts and processions, image veneration, etc.) generates negative reactions and backlash. One form of this backlash has been the emergence and rapid growth of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, which we may consider a form of Pentecostal Catholicism. Indeed, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal appropriated the most popular features of Pentecostalism (emotional worship, effusive singing, and spiritual healing) but avoided its most serious weaknesses (its lack of organizational strength, of a sense of greater community, or of cultural history) [Hartch 2014: 116].

Further, the expansion of Evangelical Christianity has not been able to erase the mark that the voluntary disestablishment of the Catholic Church left in Latin America. We could hypothesize that Evangelicals are most successful when they work within the ecumenical arrangement created by this voluntary disestablishment, focusing on civil society and participating in politics without adhering to reconstructionist goals. Evangelicals experience political backlash when they appear too hostile to Catholicism or when they support candidates that pursue some form of theocratic reconstructionism.

Of course, the irony is not lost on the observer. For, as we have seen, the forerunners of Evangelical Christianity in Latin America were dissenters who had escaped the persecution of the Church of England. The memory of persecution pushed them to create a new political order in the North American colonies in which non-establishment was central. Yet the creation of a “free space”, so significant to the Christian dissenters of yore [Martin 1993: 268], required some important political compromises in the less-pluralistic Latin American scene. Which, in turn, may occasionally lead to the temptation to seize political power to expand that free space, as we have seen in the past in places like Chile and Guatemala [Martin 1993: 253–255; Hartch 2014: 60–61, 82–87] and as we currently see in the Brazilian case. But we should also note that the Brazilian example seems exceptional and is flux, as the power of political Evangelicals may be retreating slightly. In the region, it is much more common to see Evangelical elected officials and “political Evangelicals” on the ground attempting to advance a “moral agenda”, but doing so within the limits of the democratic system, even if they accept these limits reluctantly [Pérez Guadalupe 2019: 53–68].

*A Second Disestablishment? Liberation Theology’s Migration
to Para-Ecclesial Structures*

After making these observations, it seems appropriate to ask whether Christian believers have other available options to approach the political realm beyond protest and struggle and reconstructionist agendas. We now return to liberation theology and discuss its present situation. Have the followers of liberation theology abandoned the old struggle for social justice? Has liberation theology died?

There are no conclusive answers to these questions. We simply do not have enough studies that directly focus on liberation theology in Latin

America in the period after its most successful years and the beginning of the backlash [Romero 2009; 2012; Brooks 1999, are notable exceptions]. Yet, some answers can be provisionally provided, drawing on the data we do have about the Peruvian experience.

First and foremost, I believe we should partially reject the framing of the question in terms of winners and losers. Even though competition is real and supply–demand theories do offer some insights [e.g. Trejo 2009], approaching the relationship of liberation theology with Evangelical Christianity in this way overlooks key theological convictions shaping the Catholic response.

Indeed, liberation-theology followers did not see it as their mission to regain the terrain that had been “lost” to Evangelical churches. In fact, to do so would have gone against the voluntary–disestablishment and ecumenical approach pursued by the Catholic Church in the post-Vatican-II era. Liberation-theology supporters did not see the growth of Pentecostalism as a threat (even if some bishops did), but as the natural consequence of a more pluralistic religious arena which had been partially and *voluntarily* created by the Catholic Church itself. Accordingly, liberation-theology followers prioritized an ecumenical approach to Evangelical Christianity, considering it an alternative way to attend to the needs of the poor, even if there were also some disagreements between the two camps.

But at this point it seems appropriate to return to the possibility of a second disestablishment and the emergence of new forms of sacralization discussed earlier. Indeed, the voluntary disestablishment of the Catholic Church had and has implications beyond ecumenical collaboration. In fact, in the last three decades Catholics in Peru have started to participate more actively in the public sphere *as Catholics*, but often without the support of, or outside the structures provided by, the Catholic Church.

I believe that this transformation is the key to understanding what may have happened to a significant number of the followers of liberation theology when the process of the disarticulation of most of its church-based networks started in the late 1970s. Put simply: many followers of liberation theology migrated to faith-based organizations not supported by the Catholic Church and to secular civil-society organizations *in order to* continue their faith-based struggle for social justice.

For instance, in the Peruvian case several institutions and organizations were created during the time of political violence and conflict between the terrorist organization Sendero Luminoso and the Peruvian state (1980s–1990s). To name just a few, these included: the Association for the Families of Victims of Terrorism (AFAVIT), the Association

Pro-Human Rights (APRODEH), the Legal Defence Institute (IDL), and the Pastoral Office of Human Dignity (CPDH).⁴

Even though these were secular organizations, over 60% of their members were connected to churches [Romero 2012: 125, 2009: 385ff]. The vast majority of these members were Catholic. And since Catholics of conservative leanings were consistently opposed to human rights advocacy, it is safe to infer that the members of these organizations were part of the moderate-to-progressive wing of their church. That is, in one way or another, the members of these organizations were influenced by liberation theology. In-depth interviews conducted by Coll in the case of CPDH clearly demonstrate this [Coll 2006]. Even if the respondents did not explicitly mention liberation theology or its leaders—although some did—they were very aware of the new perspective brought about by this movement. Further, some of the interviewees stressed that CPDH was a *spiritual community*, despite the fact that it was not church affiliated [Coll 2006: 49]. Similar experiences are reported by Powers in his study of “Educational Services El Agustino”. This female-led, faith-based organization, located in the Lima neighbourhood of El Agustino, was also not directly affiliated to the Catholic Church. Yet its members saw their mission as a sign of their commitment to their Catholic faith [Powers 2003]. Several cases across Peru—studied in detail by the contributors to Coll’s [2006] edited volume—confirm this general pattern. The three case studies provided by Brooks’ [1999] research in Peru—Pro Bien’s focus on the rights of children, the Pastoral Mineral’s support for fair mining practices and local ownership in Caravelí, and the Institute for Rural Education’s focus on agricultural technical training—do the same.

My point is that this work on human rights and human development was carried out through what we may call *para-ecclesial structures*. And this was the case not because the faithful wanted to leave the Catholic Church, but because the Catholic Church gave them limited opportunities to express their commitments to social justice. That is, by dismantling the multiple organizations that allowed liberation theology to grow in the 1970s, the church hierarchy created a vacuum. Catholics as *Catholics* were committed to the project of liberation but did not find room for that commitment in the institutional church. They were slandered as Marxists, as divisive, and ultimately left on their own. There

⁴ I keep the acronyms in Spanish to facilitate the recognition of these organizations, since they are known through their acronyms.

The CPDH is the only one that started as a church-sponsored organization, but it promptly acquired autonomous status.

were important exceptions among the bishops, clergy, and religious, for sure, but the church environment was overall hostile.

The solution that many of these Catholics found to this conundrum was to carry on the struggle through different means. Initially and decisively, the work was done through organizations for human rights advocacy. But later on, when relative peace and economic prosperity started to emerge in the mid-1990s, many of the followers of liberation theology kept up their work towards empowerment of the poor and the defence of people's rights through human development projects. They worked in non-profits, academic institutes, universities, and the government. They saw these structures as new sacred spaces in which their Catholic commitments could be genuinely and freely expressed. This activity did not replace church attendance, faith-based communities, and the like. But it did become a way of replacing the liberationist work that had previously been done with the institutional support of the church. Plus, at least in Peru, there were not too many alternatives: explicitly anti-liberationist bishops controlled most dioceses until the election of Pope Francis in 2013.

This brings me to the 2010s and the period leading to the present moment. In the late 2000s there began to be signs of a new ecclesial situation in Latin America. The first public indication of this was the bishops' conference of Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007. There, the bishops and Pope Benedict XVI embraced the preferential option for the poor and praised the work of the basic ecclesial communities, both directly associated with the history of liberation theology [Gutiérrez 2018]. Further, the 2013 election of Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio of Argentina, a key player in the Aparecida conference, as the successor of Pope Benedict created a much friendlier context for liberation theology.

Pope Francis' message is clearly shaped by the preferential option for the poor, as his encyclicals, public interventions, and pastoral vision show [Luciani 2016]. Moreover, Francis has appointed progressive bishops all around the world, with a significant number of key appointments in Peru and Latin America. Quite significantly, Pope Francis appointed two long-time advocates of liberation theology to key positions in the Peruvian ecclesial hierarchy: Fr. Carlos Castillo was appointed Archbishop of Lima—a position formerly held by a bishop who had actively opposed liberation theology—and Archbishop of Huancayo Pedro Barreto SJ was created a cardinal of the Catholic Church. In addition, Pope Francis has not been shy about his support for some of the most public faces of the liberation theology movement. He has met with Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez—the best-known founder of liberation theology—in Rome on several

occasions, and even wrote the preface of one of Gutiérrez's most recent books [see Müller and Gutiérrez 2014]. Similarly, in 2019 Pope Francis restored the priestly faculties of Fr. Ernesto Cardenal, a prominent supporter of the early days of the Sandinista movement. In 2018, Francis made Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador—who had been assassinated for his defence of the poor, and who is one of the heroes of liberation theology—an official saint of the Catholic Church. Lastly, in January 2022, Fr. Rutilio Grande SJ—a Salvadoran priest, also murdered for his defence of the poor and a figure who had been central to Oscar Romero's own vocation—was also beatified by the Catholic Church.

In sum, the leadership of Francis has radically transformed the ecclesial context. One may even say that he has taken things to the next level, perhaps going beyond Medellín. After all, Medellín was an authoritative and influential gathering of bishops that issued documents and created a vision for Latin American Catholicism, but this was not a vision that came from the head of the global Catholic Church. That is precisely what Francis represents. And yet, one must wonder how much the “Francis effect” [Gehring 2017] will affect the growth of Catholic liberationist commitments outside the Catholic Church.

After all, concern for social justice is now widespread among Catholics and has become significantly more expansive than its articulation within the Catholic Church [Romero 2009: 388]. Francis is a powerful advocate of the poor and marginalized, but he works within theological constraints that limit the power of his advocacy. The situation of women and the LGBTQ community is particularly difficult in Catholic circles, and not even the new life injected into the church by Francis seems to have enabled it to deal with these matters in a satisfactory fashion.

Perhaps this is simply a confirmation that the development of par ecclesial structures described above, even though contingent on the specific conditions of its time, is here to stay. This is a matter that requires more careful consideration and empirical verification. But growing rates of disaffiliation, especially among Catholic youth, seem to be related not to a rejection of faith itself, but to a rejection of a faith that does not seem to speak credibly to the younger generation [see Starks 2013; MacGregor and Haycock 2021]. Yet if this is indeed a rejection not of religion but of “bad” religion [Orsi 2007: 187–188], that points to a possible relocation of the religious impetus. My hypothesis is that, as happened with liberation theology, this religious impetus keeps migrating to faith-based organizations not supported by the Catholic Church and to secular

organizations in which many Catholic believers find the most adequate spaces for the expression of their faith.

In my view, this constitutes a process of re-sacralization, one in which para-religious or secular venues are becoming new sacred spaces. In fact, this is not a new phenomenon, but a fundamental feature of religious traditions [Taylor 2012]. Yet, it is a feature that has acquired new potential in Catholicism due to the voluntary disestablishment of the Catholic Church. This process, as we have seen, did not yield decline of religious faith or mere privatization of religious expression, but a religious reconfiguration of Latin America. Further, for a significant number of Latin American Catholics, it elicited “new forms of religious conviction” in which “the history of violence and of human degradation has led in some places to a clearer awareness that the dignity of the person must be inviolable” [Joas 2013: 31]. Of course, this sacredness of human (and non-human) life is at the heart of liberation theology.

Now, the idea that human life is sacred has always been part of the Christian tradition. But as is well known, it is not a principle that has been universally applied. The formation of religious establishments was one of the factors that precluded such universal application. In this sense, it is fair to say that church disestablishment, and the slow emergence of a democratic tradition for which the concept of human rights has become central, amounts to a new form of the sacralization of the person. This renewed sacralization of human life resulted from the cross-fertilization of different traditions, many of which were humanist and decisively secular. In turn, this permitted “the intensification of the motivation to put into practice a universalist morality that already exists in principle” [Joas 2013: 91]. Liberation theology interprets this general principle and expands this universalist morality, stressing the special attention that the most vulnerable in our societies deserve, including non-human animals and the planet itself.

But I am taking an additional step: My point is that the process of disestablishment of the Catholic Church may have led to a second kind of disestablishment. In this second disestablishment, increasingly, new processes of sacralization are taking place *outside* the conventional parameters of sacred institutions like the Catholic Church. New experiences of self-transcendence may be elicited. Such experiences take us out of the realm of the ordinary by confronting us with what is beyond our boundaries, often leaving some kind of mark and eliciting affective attachment [Joas 2008: 7–10]. Such experiences of self-transcendence seem to be emerging among many Catholics in response to the dehumanization produced by racism, misogyny, homophobia, and the like, and these experiences are energizing

people to act. And through that new motivation, “people who feel bound to a tradition find new ways to articulate it by engaging with social change or the representatives of other traditions” [Joas 2013: 131]. These new forms of articulation are creating new networks and communities in which many liberationist or progressive Catholics are finding “free spaces” in which to express their Catholic commitments, spaces rarely available in the institutional church [see Heft 2021; Rabbia *et al.* 2019 for some examples]. Will this shape the Catholicism of the future? Will these new forms of sacralization—as history would suggest—push the Catholic Church in a new direction? Only time will tell.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ASAD Talal, 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Stanford University Press).
- BOWEN JOHN Richard, 2007. *Why the French Don't like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).
- BROOKS Sarah, 1999. “Catholic Activism in the 1990s: New Strategies for the Neo-liberal Age,” in Chr. Smith and J. Prokopy, eds, *Latin American Religion in Motion* (New York, Routledge: 66–87).
- CAMPOS LIMA Eduardo, 2022. “In Brazil, Bolsonaro Is Losing Evangelical Support; Catholics Overwhelmingly Back Lula,” *CruX*, March 4 [<https://cruXnow.com/church-in-africa/2022/03/in-brazil-bolsonaro-is-losing-evangelical-support-catholics-overwhelmingly-back-lula>].
- CASANOVA José, 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press).
- 2008. “Public Religions Revisited,” in H. de Vries, ed., *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York, Fordham University Press: 101–119).
- , 2018. “Parallel Reformations in Latin America: A Critical Review of David Martin’s Interpretation of the Pentecostal Revolution,” in H. Joas, ed., *David Martin and the Sociology of Religion* (New York, Routledge: 85–106).
- CATÓLICAS POR EL DERECHO A DECIDIR—PERÚ, 2022. “Encuesta de Opinión Sobre Religión, Política y Sexualidad En Perú 2021” [http://www.cddperu.org/sites/default/files/encuesta_ipsos_cddperu_final_ok.pdf].
- CHAMBERLAIN Francisco, 2019a. “Ciudadanía, ética, y justicia en el Perú,” in C. De los Ríos and S. Paz, eds, *Francisco Chamberlain, testigo del evangelio* (Lima, CEP, IBC & Centro Loyola Ayacucho).
- , 2019b. “¿Cómo entendemos hoy el compromiso social y político?,” in C. De los Ríos and S. Paz, eds, *Francisco Chamberlain, testigo del evangelio* (Lima, CEP, IBC & Centro Loyola Ayacucho).
- , 2019c. “¿Qué queda por hacer en la perspectiva de la teología de la liberación?,” in C. De los Ríos and S. Paz, eds, *Francisco Chamberlain, testigo del evangelio* (Lima, CEP, IBC & Centro Loyola Ayacucho).
- CHAO ROMERO Robert, 2020. *Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latino Social Justice, Theology, and Identity* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press).
- COLL Pilar, 2006. “Coordinación de Pastoral de Dignidad Humana,” in C. Tovar, ed., *Ser Iglesia en tiempos de violencia* (Lima, CEP & IBC).
- DIAMANT Jeff, 2020. “How Catholics around the World See Same-Sex Marriage, Homosexuality,” *Pew Research Center* [<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/02/how-catholics-around-the-world-see-same-sex-marriage-homosexuality/>].
- FAHMY Dalia, 2020. “8 Key Findings about Catholics and Abortion,” *Pew Research Center* [<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/20/8-key-findings-about-catholics-and-abortion/>].
- GEHRING John, 2017. *The Francis Effect: A Radical Pope’s Challenge to the American Catholic Church* (New York, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers).

- GORSKI Philip S. and Ateş ALTINORDU, 2008. "After Secularization?," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 34 (1): 55–85.
- GORSKI Philip S. and Samuel L. PERRY, 2022. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press).
- GUTIÉRREZ Gustavo, 2018. "La opción preferencial por el pobre en Aparecida," in G. Gutiérrez, *De Medellín a Aparecida: Artículos reunidos* (Lima, IBC, PUCP & CEP).
- HARRISON Chase, 2022. "Poll Tracker: Brazil's 2022 Presidential Election," *American Society/Council of the Americas* [<https://www.as-coa.org/articles/poll-tracker-brazils-2022-presidential-election>].
- HARTCH Todd, 2014. *The Rebirth of Latin American Christianity* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- HEFT James L., 2021. "Understanding and Responding to Non-Affiliation," in J. L. Heft and J. E. Stets, eds, *Empty Churches: Non-Affiliation in America* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- IHRKE-BUCHROTH Uta, 2016. "Movilidad religiosa y aspiración social en iglesias neopentecostales de Lima," in C. Romero, ed., *Diversidad religiosa en el Perú: Miradas múltiples* (Lima, IBC, CEP & PUCP).
- JOAS Hans, 2008. *Do We Need Religion? On the Experience of Self-Transcendence* (Boulder, Paradigm Publishers).
- , 2013. *The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights* (Washington, DC, Georgetown University Press).
- , 2014. *Faith as an Option: Possible Futures for Christianity* (Stanford, Stanford University Press).
- , 2016. "Sacralization and Desacralization: Political Domination and Religious Interpretation," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 36 (2): 25–42.
- , 2021. *The Power of the Sacred: An Alternative to the Narrative of Disenchantment* (Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press).
- LERNOUX Penny, 1989. *People of God: The Struggle for World Catholicism* (New York, Viking).
- LUCIANI Rafael, 2016. *El Papa Francisco y la teología del pueblo* (Madrid, PPC).
- MACGREGOR Carol Ann and Ashlyn HAYCOOK, 2021. "Lapsed Catholics and Other Religious Non-Affiliates," in J. L. Heft and J. E. Stets, eds, *Empty Churches: Non-Affiliation in America* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- MACKIN Robert S., 2010. "In Word and Deed: Assessing the Strength of Progressive Catholicism in Latin America, 1960-1970s," *Sociology of Religion*, 71 (2): 216–242.
- MARIZ Cecilia Loreto, 1994. *Coping with Poverty: Pentecostals and Christian Base Communities in Brazil* (Temple, Temple University Press).
- MARTIN David, 1978. *A General Theory of Secularization* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishers).
- MARTIN David, 1993. *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishers).
- , 2002. *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishers).
- , 2015a. "Has Secularization Gone into Reverse?," in D. Wei and Z. Zhong, eds, *Sociology of Religion: A David Martin Reader* (Waco, Baylor University Press).
- , 2015b. "What I Really Said about Secularization," in D. Wei and Zhifeng Zhong, eds, *Sociology of Religion: A David Martin Reader* (Waco, Baylor University Press).
- , 2018. "Thinking with Your Life," in H. Joas, ed., *David Martin and the Sociology of Religion* (New York, Routledge: 162–190).
- MARTÍNEZ ANDRADE Luis, 2022. "Elective Affinities Between Liberation Theology and Ecology in Latin America," in W. S. Goldstein and J.-P. Reed, eds, *Religion in Rebellions, Revolutions, and Social Movements* (London, Routledge).
- MÜLLER Gerhard Ludwig and Gustavo GUTIÉRREZ, 2014. *Iglesia pobre y para los pobres* (Lima, IBC & CEP).
- NORRIS Pippa and Ronald INGLEHART, [2004] 2011. *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (New York, Cambridge University Press).
- NUSSBAUM Martha C., 2008. *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America's Tradition of Religious Equality* (New York, Basic Books).
- O'NEILL Kevin Lewis, 2010. *City of God: Christian Citizenship in Postwar Guatemala* (Berkeley, University of California Press).
- ORSI Robert A., 2007. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).
- PÉREZ GUADALUPE José Luis, 2019. *Evangelicals and Political Power in Latin America* (Lima, Instituto de Estudios Social Cristianos).
- PÉREZ VELA Rolando, 2016. "Las apropiaciones religiosas de lo público: El caso de

- los evangélicos en el Perú,” in C. Romero, ed., *Diversidad religiosa en el Perú: Miradas múltiples* (Lima, IBC, CEP & PUCP).
- PEW RESEARCH CENTER, 2014. “Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region” [<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/>].
- POWERS Tom, 2003. *The Call of God: Women Doing Theology in Peru* (Albany, State University of New York Press).
- RABBIA Hugo H., Gustavo MORELLO, Néstor DA COSTA and Catalina ROMERO, eds, 2019. *La religión como experiencia cotidiana: Creencias, prácticas y narrativas espirituales en Sudamérica* (Lima, PUCP, EDUCC & Universidad Católica del Uruguay).
- ROBBINS Joel, 2004. “The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33 (1) : 117–143.
- ROLIM Francisco, 1980. *Religião e Classes Populares* (Petrópolis, Vozes).
- ROMERO Catalina, 2009. “Religion and Public Spaces: Catholicism and Civil Society in Peru,” in F. Hagopian, ed., *Religious Pluralism, Democracy, and the Catholic Church in Latin America* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press).
- , 2012. “Religión y política en el Perú, 2000–2010,” in A. R. Ameigeiras, ed., *Cruces, intersecciones, conflictos: Relaciones político-religiosas en Latiamérica* (Buenos Aires, CLACSO).
- SECOND GENERAL CONFERENCE OF LATIN AMERICAN BISHOPS, 1990. “The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council,” in A. T. Hennelly, ed., *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books).
- SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, 2010. *Gaudium et Spes*, in D. J. O’Brien and T. A. Shannon, eds, *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, Expanded edition (Maryknoll/New York, Orbis).
- SHIFFRIN Steven H., 2009. *The Religious Left and Church-State Relations* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).
- SMITH Christian, 1991. *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press).
- STARKS Brian, 2013. “Exploring Religious Self-Identification among U.S. Catholics: Traditionals, Moderates, and Liberals,” *Sociology of Religion*, 74 (3): 314–342.
- STOLL David, 1990. *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley, University of California Press).
- SULLIVAN Winnifred F., 2005. *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).
- TAYLOR Charles, 2007. *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press).
- , 2011. “A Catholic Modernity?,” in C. Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press).
- , 2012. “What Was the Axial Revolution?,” in R. N. Bellah and H. Joas, eds, *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press).
- THE ECONOMIST, 2022. “Evangelicals Are Key to Brazil’s Upcoming Election” [<https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2022/05/14/evangelicals-are-key-to-brazils-upcoming-election>].
- THIRD GENERAL CONFERENCE OF LATIN AMERICAN BISHOPS, 1990. “Evangelization in Latin America’s Present and Future,” in A. T. Hennelly, ed., *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books).
- TREJO Guillermo, 2009. “Religious Competition and Ethnic Mobilization in Latin America: Why the Catholic Church Promotes Indigenous Movements in Mexico,” *American Political Science Review*, 103 (3): 323–342.
- TROELTSCH Ernst, 1960. *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 [transl. Olive Wyon] (New York/Evanston, Harper Torchbooks).
- WINGEIER-RAYO Philip, 2011. *Where Are the Poor? A Comparison of the Ecclesial Base Communities and Pentecostalism, a Case Study in Cuernavaca, Mexico* (Eugene, Pickwick Publications).
- ZAGORIN Perez, 2003. *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).
- ZALPA Genaro and Hans Egil OFFERDAL, eds, 2008. *¿El reino de Dios es de este mundo?: El papel ambiguo de las religiones en la lucha contra la pobreza* (Bogotá, Siglo del Hombre; CLACSO & CROP).

Résumé

Cet article soutient que la soi-disant disparition de la théologie de la libération est une simplification excessive du développement d'un mouvement qui dépend d'une compréhension centrée sur l'Église du processus de sécularisation. Pourtant, une interprétation différente peut nous permettre de voir la sécularisation comme un processus capable de susciter de nouvelles formes de sacralisation. Mon argument est que la théologie de la libération est restée active dans la société civile, en particulier par le biais d'organisations confessionnelles non soutenues par l'Église catholique. Ces organisations de la société civile sont devenues de nouveaux espaces sacrés pour répondre aux besoins des plus vulnérables. Pour justifier ces affirmations, je présente une étude comparative du développement parallèle de la théologie de la libération et du pentecôtisme en Amérique latine, en particulier sur le cas du Pérou. Étant donné que les deux mouvements se concentrent sur les plus démunis et peuvent donc rivaliser pour le même public, l'attention portée au succès ou à l'échec de leurs stratégies aidera à élucider l'état actuel de la théologie de la libération.

Mots-clés : Théologie de la libération ; Pentecôtisme ; Sécularisation ; Sacralisation ; Christianisme latino-américain.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag wird argumentiert, dass der angebliche Niedergang der Befreiungstheologie eine zu starke Vereinfachung der Entwicklung der Bewegung darstellt, die auf einem Verständnis des Säkularisierungsprozesses aus kirchlicher Perspektive beruht. Ein anderer Interpretationsansatz könnte uns jedoch erlauben, die Säkularisierung als einen Prozess zu begreifen, der neue Sakralisierungsformen hervorrufen kann. Mein Argument: die Befreiungstheologie ist in der Zivilgesellschaft dank konfessionell gebundener Verbände aktiv geblieben, die nicht von der katholischen Kirche unterstützt werden. Diese Verbände der Zivilgesellschaft sind zu neuen sakralen Räumen geworden, um den Bedürfnissen der Schwächsten zu entsprechen. Zur Untermauerung der vorangehenden Behauptungen präsentiere ich eine vergleichende Studie über eine parallele Entwicklung von Befreiungstheologie und Pfingstbewegung in Lateinamerika, insbesondere im Falle Perus. Da sich beide Bewegungen auf die Schwächsten konzentrieren und somit um dasselbe Publikum rivalisieren, werden ihre Erfolgs- oder Misserfolgsstrategien den aktuellen Stand der Befreiungstheologie zu erklären helfen.

Schlüsselwörter: Befreiungstheologie; Pfingstbewegung; Säkularisierung; Sakralisierung; lateinamerikanisches Christentum