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2020

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Katherine Preudhomme

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Recommended Citation

Preudhomme, Katherine, "Liberation Theology: The Power of Religion in Revolutionary Movements" (2020). *Honors Projects and Presentations: Undergraduate*. 404.

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Liberation Theology: the Power of Religion in Revolutionary Movements

Kate Preudhomme

“Christ, Christ Jesus, / be in solidarity. / Not with the oppressor class / which exploits and devours / the community / but with the oppressed / with my people / who thirst for peace”

-Nicaraguan Peasant Mass

In the 1960s, a new theological perspective emerged within the Catholic Church in Latin America. This socially oriented understanding of faith – liberation theology – challenged the traditional alliance between the Church and political elites. It proclaimed that God stands with the poor and oppressed throughout history, working to liberate them from unjust economic and political situations. It called on the Church to actively stand with the poor to promote this liberation. In Nicaragua, liberation theology drove many to participate in the revolutionary struggle in the 1970s. Ultimately, the experience of liberation theology within Nicaragua shows that religion is not inherently conservative, it can play an important role within revolutionary social movements.

Scope

In order to understand how religion can act within social movements, it is important to examine the role liberation theology played within Nicaragua as well as evaluate the implications of this historical analysis. The paper will first address the theoretical background of the relationship between religion and social movements. Then, it will delve into the development of liberation theology within Latin America, noting both the historical context and evolution of the theology within the Church. From there, the paper will turn to Nicaragua to examine the impact of liberation theology on revolutionary involvement. In the analysis section, the paper will break down how liberation religion translated to action within Nicaragua, how it fits within social movement theory, and what liberation theology can reveal about the power of religion within social movements.

In order to give the reader necessary context, certain terms need to be defined at the beginning. This paper focuses on a theological development within the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America. When the paper refers to the Church, Christianity, Catholicism, or religion, it

is referring to this institution and those within it. This distinct focus does not mean that the power of religion is limited to the Catholic Church. Rather, it points to the specific historical framework of this paper. In the analysis section, liberation theology is seen within the larger role of religion in social movements. This evaluation is not specific to the Catholic Church, although it still draws its conclusions from that particular historical experience. When the paper references religion, it refers to both religious beliefs – the theology – and to the institutional structure created from those beliefs. These two elements cannot, and should not, be broken apart when assessing religion and social movements. They both interact to form the religious base for social action.

Theoretical Background

The purpose of this section is to establish the context for how religion is viewed within society. Throughout history, many theorists have viewed religion as a primarily conservative force within society resistant to political and social change. Conservative in this sense refers to “the tendency to prefer an existing or traditional situation to change” (“Conservatism”). Karl Marx believed that institutionalized religion would act as a counter-revolutionary force if there was an uprising based on class (Löwy 4). Religious institutions are typically controlled by elites who will act according to their class interests. He viewed religion as intrinsically tied to concerns over “wealth, power, and prestige” (Smith, “Correcting” 7). Marx contributes to the study of religion and social movements by shedding light on the power of economic concerns in the actions of many religious institutions. If there is disagreement within the religion itself, it is likely to be based in social class and political differences (Smith, “Correcting” 8). Marx did not view religious belief and involvement as an important source of social change; rather it was considered a bulwark of the status quo.

Other scholars have provided nuance to Marx's unidimensional understanding of religion's role in society. German philosopher Friedrich Engels, writing specifically about Christianity, noted that the religion is not a static concept but "a cultural system undergoing transformations in different historical periods" (Löwy 8). These transformations often involved conflict between "antagonistic social forces" within the institutional framework of Christianity (Löwy 8). In addition, Engels saw a recurrent synthesis between the ideas of socialism and those of Christianity because both are mass movement, endure suffering, and "preach an imminent liberation from slavery and misery" (Löwy 8-9). Ernst Bloch, another German philosopher, saw the power of religion in its vision of utopia and hope-driven protest (Löwy 15). Bloch focused on the "revolutionary potential" of faith-based cultural movements (Muskus 68). Antonio Gramsci revised Marxist by focusing on the "counterhegemonic potential of culture" (Kniss and Burns 697). Religion – as part of the culture – has the potential to speak out against the political and social establishment. Despite these modifications, many still believe that religion invariably acts as a conservative force within society and will be resistant to change.

Social Movement Theory

Religion acts within particular societies in distinct ways. Religion affects politics while politics change and challenge religion (Cleary 206). One avenue of this interaction is through social movements inspired by religion. This section lays out several theories of social movements. This is not intended to be a comprehensive list of social movement theories but is designed to establish an understanding of why and how social movements develop. This framework will be used to analyze how liberation theology behaved as a social movement.

Social movements are a call from the public for political or social change, principally occurring outside the bounds of institutionalized government. Manuel Castells views social

movements as both “proactive movements, aiming at transforming human relationships at their most fundamental level” and “reactive movements” which act against perceived threats (Kirmani 3). Marco Giugni emphasizes the complexity and relational nature of social movements, describing the different actors engaging in “A cluster of political practices” (Kirmani 3). Social movements occur when an issue arises and people are willing to act in order to change some part of the political or social system (Kirmani 4). James Beckford narrowed the definition of social movements to movements that “pursue their grievances and campaigns mainly outside the channels of institutionalized politics” (Kirmani 4). Although they frequently call on the institutions to respond to their calls for action, a social movement cannot simply be a faction of the political elite who are pressing an agenda. Rather, it is a mobilization of a large number of people who engage in a “series of processes, relationships and interactions” in order to gain power and achieve their goals (Kirmani 4). A revolutionary movement – such as the one in Nicaragua – is a form of social movement.

In the early years of the development of social movement theory, social movements were seen in a negative light; entities resulting from the discontent of the public. The formal study of social movements did not begin until the 1960s, although the roots of study into collective action had its earlier groundings in the structural-functionalist perspective (Kirmani 5). Robert Park, an influential American sociologist in the early 1900s, viewed collective behavior “as a symptom of societal imbalances” but also “as part of the normal operation of society” (Kirmani 6). In the 1960s, thinking within the field continued to view social movements as “a manifestation of societal malfunction” (Kirmani 7). Neil Smelser postulated in 1962 that the collective behavior seen in social movements, religious cults, and other institutions, was a direct “result of the inability of societal mechanisms to produce social cohesion” (Kirmani 7). Early stages of

research into social movements focused on the contexts that led to social movements rather than the processes the movements engaged in and the causes of their success (Kirmani 7).

Resource Mobilization Theory

In the 1960s, new theories about social movements developed out of the protest experiences of the industrialized world (Kirmani 7). One of these theories is resource mobilization theory (RM). RM examines the structure of a social movement and how these organizational aspects shape the movement. John McCarthy and Mayer Zald, the scholars who articulated the theory, argue that the “availability of resources, both material and non-material” is the determining factor for the emergence and success of a social movement (Kirmani 8). RM holds constant people’s desire for social change, believing that there is always a reason for discontent (Smith, *Emergence* 57). The true predictive power for whether a social movement will occur are the resources at its disposition. These resources include “time, money, facilities...and access to media” (Zald 322). RM claims that “a focus on grievances has often led scholars to miss the central social processes that help create and sustain social movements” (Zald 322). However, RM has been criticized for overemphasizing institutions and frameworks of social movements at the expense of recognizing the particular grievances of a movement. RM is also criticized for “the over-emphasis on rationality and political strategy within such approaches at the expense of factors such as emotion and culture” (Kirmani 9). RM is a useful theory to examine the processes of a social movement, but less helpful in examining the root causes behind why a social movement develops in the first place.

New Social Movement Theory

Another theory developed in the 1960s is the new social movement theory (NSM). This theory states that a class-based understanding of the causes behind social movements is

insufficient to understand the “processes of social conflict and change” (Kirmani 10). Rather, as Murray Edelman put it, these social movements also center around “struggles over symbolic, informational, and cultural resources” (Kirmani 10). In contrast to RM, this theory helps “highlight the importance of non-rational actors, such as emotion” in the establishment of social movements (Kirmani 10). It still views social movements as resulting from structural incapacity, but now this structural incapacity is not limited to economic issues. It can relate to any aspect of culture and identity (Kirmani 11). This focus – especially on the idea of identity – marked a shift away from a rational, institutionalized base of social movement theory. Another facet of NSM theory is the recognition that those who help craft these movements are not the most marginalized actors in society. Rather, “it is often the economically secure and relatively advantaged members of society” who are driving the movements (Kirmani 13). These NSM tend to be very decentralized and anti-institutional (Kirmani 14). The major contribution of NSM theory is the assertion that identity and culture play prominent roles within these social movements.

Political Process Model

The political process model – articulated by Doug McAdam in 1982 – provides a broad model to explain the emergence and success of social movements (McAdam). The theoretical foundation of this theory is also found in the 1978 work of Charles Tilly (Caren). In this model, successful social movements need political opportunities, associated organizations, and a collective awareness of the need and potential for change (Smith, *Emergence* 59). Political changes such as “wars, industrialization, internal political realignments, prolonged unemployment, and widespread demographic changes” provide the opportunities for social

movements to materialize (Smith, *Emergence* 58). In addition, social movements need a network of people, methods to promote cooperation, and ways to communicate (Smith, *Emergence* 60). However, macro-level changes and organizational factors are insufficient to form a viable social movement. They merely create the “structural conductivity” for a potential movement (Smith, *Emergence* 61). Social movements need a social-psychological component to effect change.

This social-physiological component is known as insurgent consciousness. Insurgent consciousness is the collective realization that change is necessary and possible (Smith, *Emergence* 62) It involves not only a recognition of the need for political and social change, but also a belief that the circumstances can change. In other words, social movements require a “subjective interpretation of the objective social situation” (Smith, *Emergence* 61-62). This insurgent consciousness gives the movement the motivation and impetus needed to develop and sustain its work. The political process model asserts that the longevity and success of a movement are dependent on changing conditions in the political atmosphere, institutions and strength of insurgent consciousness (Smith, *Emergence* 66). This theory provides important insights into how political, institutional, and social trends interact to form outcomes of social movements.

Liberation Theology

Now that the paper has established the theoretical background, it will turn to an examination of liberation theology. First, the paper will define the movement and track its development in Latin America. From there, it will turn to an in-depth analysis of Nicaragua, showing how religion inspired political action in the 1970s. After this historical perspective, the paper will analyze how liberation theology fits within social movement theory and what it tells

us about religion's power to propel social action. The following section provides political and economic context to better understand the situation in Latin America at the time.

Political and Economic Context

Latin America during the mid-1900s faced strong political repression, international intervention, and high economic inequality. It is important to note that the region is diverse, politically, socially, and economically. This section primarily seeks to outline the general trends in the region and does not account for the particularities of certain countries. The post-World War II period brought strong economic development to Latin America. However, this development was often based on highly volatile commodity trading, which left many nations in the region in weaker economic positions vis-à-vis advanced industrial economies (Ocampo 16; Perez 17). Latin American countries did not have the strong technological base to diversify their economies away from commodities (Ocampo 17). Although states expanded social services during this time period, the growth was highly unequal and did not help significantly lessen inequality ("Latin America"). This was partially because "economic liberalism was not synchronized with political liberalism" (Ocampo 19). The effects of this remain today as the region has the highest levels of inequality worldwide (Ocampo 29). This economic inequality had social and political consequences.

The political unrest in the region was heightened by the international political scene. Set within the context of the Cold War, the success of the Cuban revolution 1959 increased Latin America's strategic influence for both the United States and the Soviet Union (Perez 11). The United States worried that the success of the Cuban revolution would inspire other socialist movements throughout the region. Those disaffected by the current system – particularly students and those from the middle class – did view the Cuban revolution as a source of hope

(“Latin America”). The regional economic slowdown in the latter half of the 1950s did nothing to allay the fear of future socialist uprisings (Holley 37). The Soviet Union’s policy of supporting Marxist guerrilla fights also intensified international involvement in the region (Perez 12).

This threat of Soviet advancement in the region led the United States to pursue a strong interventionist policy in the region. The most famous of these intervention attempts was the failed Bay of Pigs invasion attempt of Cuba in 1961 launched from Nicaragua (Cruz 8). America also supported “militant coups and repressive regimes in countries as Guatemala, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay” (Perez 11). The Alliance for Progress – created in 1961 – encouraged free trade and economic cooperation between the United States and Latin American countries. (Holley 37). Organizations such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), launched in 1960, provided yet another way for the United States to strengthen its economic dominance (Holley 38). The intervention of the United States ultimately aggravated political tensions within the region.

Latin America’s political experience during the mid-1900s was marked by violence. The backdrop of the Cold War led to “ideological polarization” and political violence (Perez 16). This political violence included both repression from the political regimes as well as rural guerilla movements and terrorism (“Latin America”). Many movements on the left of the political spectrum became more radical in the wake of the Cuban revolution, hoping to gain Cuban or Soviet support to achieve their goals (Perez 12). Conservative governments employed a “Cold War rationale” when dealing with political opposition (Perez 15). This rationale relied on the use of violence and repression to “limit collective action and socio-political inclusion of pressure groups” (Perez 16). The political and economic elites grew increasingly worried about the threat to their power by these social advocacy groups. Because of this opposition and

repression, 1960-1990 was “the period of most intense and widespread political violence lived in Latin America” (Perez 12).

The Catholic Church within Latin America

Now that the paper has addressed the political and economic situation in Latin America, it will now give a brief history of the Catholic Church within Latin America. From there, it will move into a description of liberation theology and how it emerged within the Church. Before the 1960s, the Catholic Church in Latin America was firmly entrenched as a politically conservative force. The Catholic Church was involved in the European colonization of Latin America. The first diocese was founded in 1513 in Santo Domingo (Cruz 4). The political establishment supported the authority of the Catholic Church while the Church taught that the European rulers were “embodiments of the will of God” (Tombs 15). A select few within the Church – including Bartolomé de las Casas – spoke out against the cruelties done to the indigenous peoples in the name of Christianity. For the most part, however, the Church “served as an uncritical chaplain to colonial power and encouraged its exploitative practices” (Tombs 25). This close link between the Church and government meant that for the oppressed peoples of Latin America, the Church was a foe rather than a potential ally.

Even after the Latin American nations achieved independence, the Catholic Church protected its own interests and attempted to maintain its power. The Catholic Church was a large landholder in Latin America at the time of independence in the early 1800s. As countries gained independence, the Church’s land – along with their other privileges – were stripped away (Muskus 97). The institutional strength of the Church was further weakened as many clergy left their posts and returned to Spain (Tombs 41). This meant that for vast areas of Latin America “the influence of the Church was minimal, simply due to the scarcity of clergy” (Cleary 190).

The Church still did not stand on the side of the poor, it continued to protect its own interests (Tombs 41). It allied with the industrial leaders, military forces, and repressive regimes (Pattnayak, “Social Change” 4). Because of these associations, the Catholic Church did little to support the marginalized and those seeking to change the current system.

The theology of the Catholic Church reinforced this conservative role within society. Traditionally, Catholic theology emphasized the sovereignty of God in all things, including the physical situation of the people. If someone was suffering, it was because “social and economic misery was inevitable and ordained by God” (Sawchuk 44). From this perspective, God’s hand should not be questioned. Rather, it was the duty of a good Catholic to accept their physical situation. Physical suffering was also contextualized using the model of the suffering of Christ (Löwy 23). Jesus experienced immense suffering in his life and his followers should expect the same. This theological model reinforces the reticence of the Church to intervene in the political or economic sphere to help the poor. The messages focused on how to persevere and become holy in light of the challenges of the temporal world.

Despite this general inattention to social action, there were various attempts to revitalize Church doctrine on the subject. This impetus largely came from Europe as the Catholic Church struggled to respond to the appeal of socialism among industrial workers. Pope Leo XIII published an encyclical in 1891 “which sought to deal with the problems of the working class” (Muskus 84-85). Subsequent popes also sought to offer solace and help to the working class. Much of this work was also an attempt to fight the “threat of communism” (Muskus 88). After World War II, “concerns of modern philosophy and the social sciences” prompted new theological reflection (Löwy 40). The Catholic Action movement – focused on Catholic influence in the larger society – became influential in Latin America in the 1930s and beyond

(Tombs 58). This movement pursued “social reforms in accordance with a traditionalist moral code” (Tombs 59). Even though the message of liberation theology was different, the “social orientation and methodological approach” of the Catholic Action movement served as building blocks for liberation theology (Tombs 60).

The Catholic Church began to reevaluate its role within society during the 1950s and 1960s. The election of Pope John XXIII in 1958 sparked new theological discussion about the larger place of the Church in the world (Löwy 40). The Vatican examined its influence in various global regions as well as how the Church interacted with other sectors of the society. This assessment stemmed from the perceived need to counter the rising spread of communism (Tombs 59). In order to accomplish this, Pope John XXIII established the Second Vatican Council which lasted from 1962-1965 (Löwy 40). Along with internal reforms, the council advocated for a more active role of the Church within society (Berryman 26). It affirmed that the Church has a “serious commitment to the cause of the poor” (Pottenger 14). This institutional reform lent support to those within the Latin American Church who were establishing the theology of liberation.

Development of Liberation Theology

Liberation theology was a praxis-based theology developed in response to the wretched conditions of the poor within Latin America (Czajkoski 7). The roots of the theology were formed in the early 1960s, although it did not gain widespread institutional support until 1968 (Löwy 32; Pottenger 15). The goal of liberation theology is to “eradicate poverty and establish a just society” (Muskus 11). This theology begins with the understanding that God “acts in history to liberate the oppressed” (Smith, *Emergence* 32). Because God displays a “preferential option for the poor,” the Church is called to do the same (Dear). Leonardo and Clodovis Boff,

Franciscan priests from Brazil, summed up liberation theology by saying that it “was born when faith confronted the injustice done to the poor” (Muskus 11).

Gustavo Gutiérrez, the Peruvian priest who is known as the father of liberation theology, provides a working definition of liberation theology in his 1971 book *A Theology of Liberation*.

He defines liberation theology as:

a reflection based on the Gospel and the experiences of men and women committed to the process of liberation in this oppressed and exploited subcontinent of Latin America. It is a theological reflection born of that shared experience in the effort to abolish the present unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human (Muskus 11).

Liberation theology used a praxis-based model to establish a new method for doing theology.

Praxis “implies doing, acting, and practice” (“Praxis”). Within liberation theology, the praxis of liberation – “involvement with the liberation of those who are oppressed in the world” – was the first step of theology (“Praxis”). Theological reflection occurred after this involvement and was determined by it (Muskus 12). Liberation theologians were conscious that traditional theology reinforced the oppression of the poor. They altered their theology so that it corresponded better to their understanding of God and his message of liberation.

The theology of liberation was enacted through a process known as conscientization. Conscientization is a teaching method delineated by Paulo Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Pottenger 17). It is “the way in which individuals and communities develop a critical understanding of their social reality through reflection and action” (Steyaert). In other words, conscientization is the process in which a community comes to realize their historical and political situatedness. Through critical analysis of one’s place, communities are better able to work for change. This process challenges the traditional theological beliefs being conveyed to

the community by the dominant culture (Muskus 63). Through this consciousness-raising, communities “repossess their culture and religious beliefs” (Muskus 63). This process of conscientization – the praxis component of the theology – enables the poor to find true liberation.

Liberation theology gained widespread institutional support during the Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) in Medellín, Colombia in 1968. The purpose of the conference was to reflect on Vatican II and to establish “a new and more dynamic presence of the Church in the present transformation of Latin America (Leiken and Rubin 124). To do this, the conference examined the physical situation of the poor in Latin America, concluding that many faced a “situation of injustice that can be called institutionalized violence” (Leiken and Rubin 127). From there, the conference reflected on the Church’s theological commitment to the poor and the pastoral consequences of this analysis (Berryman 27). Those at the Medellín conference agreed that liberation involved “both physical and spiritual salvation” (Pottenger 17). Because of that, the Church had a responsibility to fight both individual sin and “sinful social structures” within a society (Pottenger 17). This conference lent institutional support to the theologians and clergy within Latin America who had already begun to practice this theology of liberation (Pottenger 15).

Liberation theology was expressed through the creation of Christian communities throughout Latin America. This grassroots movement of liberation theology began as early as the 1950s, originating primarily in Brazil. In 1956 a Brazilian bishop named Agnelo Rossi initiated a plan for “evangelization and ‘welfare’” in his diocese (Muskus 12-13). Because there were very few clergy, people in Latin America frequently lacked the ability to practice their faith on a regular basis. Rossi trained community members to act as stand-ins for the clergy for small group gathering (Muskus 13). In these meetings, the groups sought to contextualize their faith in light

of their poverty (Muskus 13). These Christian Base Communities (CEBs) formed the core of liberation theology. In the broadest sense, a CEB was a group of Catholics who gathered – with or without a member of the clergy – to participate in religious reflection. They engaged in the process of conscientization by discussing “how traditional biblical themes and other religious teachings relate to current social problems: (Pottenger 18). The Medellín conference affirmed the CEB “as a vehicle for political activity among the poor to effect their liberation” (Pottenger 18). Gustavo Gutiérrez affirmed that the CEBs – the collective action of the poor within the Church – were critical to the goal of liberation (Muskus 13).

Because of this praxis-based method of doing theology, the term liberation theology does not solely refer to theological beliefs. Rather, it was a growing commitment to the liberation of the poor that occurred within the Catholic Church at this time. Put another way, it was the process of shaping theological beliefs and political actions because of the religious ethic of liberation. For poor communities, this meant engagement in the work of conscientization: critically reflecting on their social reality and discussing the theological implications. For the clergy of the Catholic Church, liberation theology took the form of working within these poor communities and standing with them in their quest for liberation. The political involvement of liberation theology was shaped by this burgeoning commitment to the poor and continuing theological reflection. When this paper uses the term liberation theology, it refers to the process of conscientization, theological reflection, and political action that was occurring within the Catholic Church.

Interaction with Political Ideologies

Since liberation theology involved political action, it drew from and interacted with secular theories. Many of these interactions were the natural result of people synthesizing their

faith with their lived economic and political experiences. Other interactions were a conscious dialogue or coalition with other sectors of society. This collaboration with other theories – both intentionally and unintentionally – gave those who believed in liberation theology the avenue to pursue political change. Liberation theologians were aware of the interactions between their theology and the economic and political world around them. Rather than viewing this as a potential deficit, they understood that those interactions should be expected. Gustavo Gutiérrez put it this way when he said that “Theologies necessarily carry the mark of the time and ecclesial context in which they are born” (Petrella 3). Because liberation theology was produced out of the poverty and despair of the Latin American people, it is understandable that the theology was influenced by and interacted with theories that also spoke into these difficulties.

Dependency Theory

Liberation theology recognized the dangers of unchecked capitalism for the poor in Latin America. In this way, it connected with dependency theory, which argued that Latin America was being disadvantaged in the current economic system. Dependency theorists maintained that the oppression of dominant nations like the United States kept Latin America in a subordinate position (Tombs 92). American-led initiatives, such as the Alliance for Progress, were incapable of solving any of the problems that Latin America was facing (Tombs 91). According to this theory, Latin America did not need more development along the current lines of free trade capitalism; it needed liberation from the oppressive world economy (Tombs 92). Liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez also “saw the capitalist economic and political structures as the culprits of the current poverty” (Muskus 18). Liberation theology opposed the idolatry of capitalism and the subjugation of all other considerations to the endless quest for profit (Andrade 107). They recognized, along with dependency theorists, that comprehensive change is an

effective way to provide liberation to those marginalized by the capitalist system. Dependency theory's call for freedom from economic oppression resonated with that of liberation theology.

Marxism

Liberation theology interacted significantly with Marxist thought. This relationship caused significant resistance within the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Although the Vatican welcomed a renewed emphasis on social action, it did not accept any dialogue with Marxist or socialist thought (Tombs 144). Liberation theology pushed against that position of the Church as it drew much of its analytical framework from Marxism. Liberation theology relied on Marxist "concepts and categories like class, conflict, and exploitation" (Levine, *Popular Voices* 42). Marxism provided a way for Christians to make sense of their historical particularities. Because the political and economic situation of their time was not discussed in their religious texts, liberation theologians turned to Marxism as a framework of understanding (Pottenger 63). Marxism also was inspiring in its call for radical change. Karl Marx criticized philosophers for only talking about reality, when "the point, however, is to change it" (Levine, *Popular Voices* 43). Liberation theologians were similarly adamant that theological and philosophical reflection should lead to transformation, not just discourse.

The similarities between Marxist thought and liberation theology had limitations. Marxism predicted that the working class will inevitably rise up against the bourgeoisie and overthrow the capitalist system. However, liberation theology did not see this process as inevitable (Spickard). Another significant difference is the holistic approach of liberation theology. Gustavo Gutiérrez affirmed this when he said that "It is a serious mistake to reduce what is happening among us today to a social or political problem" (Levine, *Popular Voices* 43). Rather, liberation theology advocates for a spiritual transformation that also has political and

economic components. Liberation theology primarily adopted Marxism as a sociological instrument to understand Latin America. It was never adopted as an all-inclusive theoretical framework (Spickard; Smith, *Emergence* 30). Liberation theology was a spiritual awakening rooted in the painful political and economic realities of Latin America. Marxism was central to that analysis insofar as it helped form a deeper understanding of the problems of the current system and potential revolutionary solutions.

Aside from the ideological interaction with Marxism, those who ascribed to liberation theology often expressed their beliefs through participation in Marxist and socialist uprisings. These movements were already active within Latin America, providing an avenue for liberation theology to effect change. Many who ascribed to liberation theology saw no conflict between participation in an armed uprising and their Christian beliefs. Camilo Torres, the Colombian priest who joined the National Army in Colombia, went so far as to say that “The Catholic who is not a revolutionary is living in mortal sin” (Löwy 44; Smith, *Emergence* 17). Throughout Central America, Christians became “significant actors in Marxist-led revolutionary movements” (Berryman 1). In other parts of Latin America, this cooperation with Marxism was expressed as an intellectual exchange or loose alliance. In 1972, the Christians for Socialism movement met in Santiago to suggest a full “synthesis between Marxism and Christianity” (Löwy 47). The Catholic Church responded by banning the organization (Löwy 47). Liberation theology was distinct from Marxism, yet the partnership between the two theories provoked strong backlash within the Church hierarchy.

Nicaragua

Now that the paper has addressed the development of liberation theology, it will now turn to an in-depth analysis of liberation theology within Nicaragua. By focusing on a specific

country, it is clear to see how liberation theology led to political action. This allows an opportunity to examine the broader power that religion has within social movements. Nicaragua is an ideal country in which to study the impact of liberation theology. It had a prolonged revolutionary movement that culminated in the overthrow of the regime in 1979. This revolution enjoyed broad participation from Christians who drew on their religious beliefs to justify their involvement.

Nicaragua also presents the opportunity to see how the hierarchy of the Catholic Church both engaged in liberation theology and resisted its more radical implications. The controversy surrounding liberation theology was not simply about what it meant to be a Church that sides with the poor. It revolved around the desirability of a socialist revolution, the acceptable use of violence, and the focus on temporal liberation. Understanding the diverging opinions within the Nicaraguan Church provides a richer understanding of the factors that influence religion's ability to act in the political sphere. The paper will first provide historical and political context and then explore how liberation theology impacted the Nicaraguan Church. From there, it will provide an overview of the revolutionary struggle and detail the Christian involvement.

Historical and Political Context

Nicaraguan politics during the 19th and 20th centuries was marked by foreign intervention and political repression. In the 1850s, an American by the name of William Walker invaded Nicaragua and formed a government, supported by Church officials (Berryman 51). This invasion was set within a context of a bitter political divide between the Liberals and the Conservatives ("Nicaragua." *Colombia*). America became involved in Nicaragua's domestic affairs again in 1912, when marines entered the country to support the Conservative provisional president, Adolfo Díaz ("Nicaragua" *Columbia*). A Liberal general named Augusto César

Sandino refused to surrender to the foreign forces and engaged in guerrilla warfare (Walker *Living in the Shadow* 23). Sandino's resistance caused the marines to withdraw from Nicaragua in 1933, at which point he entered into peace negotiations with the government (Walker *Living in the Shadow* 23). Despite this promise of peace, Sandino was murdered in 1934 under orders of Anastasio Somoza García (Walker *Living in the Shadow* 23). Sandino came to epitomize Nicaraguan nationalism and the struggle against foreign imperialism and inspired the revolutionary fighters in the 1979 uprising.

The murder of Sandino marked the beginning of the Somoza dictatorship. Anastasio Somoza García had been carefully selected by the Marines to take control of the Nicaraguan army known as the National Guard (Walker *Living in the Shadow* 23). He "officially became president in 1937 and ruled for 20 years," sometimes through puppet governments to maintain a facade of democracy ("Nicaragua" *Columbia*). By the time of his assassination in 1956, Somoza owned "a tenth of the cultivated land...and fortune estimated at \$60 million" (Berryman 4). His son Luis Somoza Debayle controlled the government until his death in 1966 ("Nicaragua" *Columbia*). Another of Somoza's sons, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, took power in 1967, enforcing a "cruder and harsher style of dictatorship" than his brother (Walker *Living in the Shadow* 30). The regime faced a growing revolutionary movement that forced Somoza to resign in July 1979 (Walker *Living in the Shadow* 39). The dictatorship, which lasted for more than 40 years, was notoriously corrupt (Norsworthy and Barry 4).

Under the Somoza dictatorship, Nicaragua faced a dire economic situation. The development that did occur benefitted a small, wealthy class at the expense of the majority of Nicaraguans who lived in poverty. In the countryside, 1% of the rural population owned 41.2% of the land in 1973 (Foroohar 30). The use of land for export crops such as cotton forced many to

move to cities such León and Managua (Foroohar 30). This urban crowding “overloaded the urban employment market, and put more pressure on the already weak public service sector” (Foroohar 30). Those who remained in rural areas found that export crop production had reduced the availability of land to grow food crops (Berryman 46). Rural areas had a literacy rate of merely 29.6% in 1963 (Foroohar 144). This immense poverty impacted the human capital development of Nicaragua. Before the 1979 revolution, Nicaraguans had “little access to education, health care, and other public services” (Walker *Living in the Shadow* 3). In 1979, the life expectancy for Nicaraguans was 10 years less than the average of Central American countries at the time (Walker *Living in the Shadow* 3). The corruption of the Somoza regime only added to the suffering experienced by Nicaraguans at this time

Catholic Church Within Nicaragua

The Catholic Church within Nicaragua focused on maintaining its own power, doing little to improve the lives of the poor. It was virtually absent in the countryside, had few priests, and openly aligned with a dictatorship despised by the people (Dodson and O'Shaughnessy 117). The leadership of the Nicaraguan Church was worried about the spread of communism, venturing criticism of the Cuban government but withholding judgement about the Somoza dictatorship (Dodson and O'Shaughnessy 117). This anti-communist rhetoric was a regional ecclesiastic sentiment. In 1956, the Episcopal Conference of Central America and Panama declared communism to be “the greatest political and religious enemy” (Foroohar 41). Aside from this virulent anti-communism, the Church within Nicaragua engaged in little critical political reflection. Rather, they were complicit in the Somoza dictatorship and actively worked to legitimize it from a moral perspective (Monroy García 88).

This unquestioning support for the Somoza regime was challenged only after the Medellín conference of CELAM in 1968 (Monroy García 88). As mentioned previously, this conference sought a dynamic presence of the Church within society and called for the promotion of “the values of peace and justice” (Leiken and Rubin 124). The Medellín conference insisted on the necessity of peace throughout the process of conscientization, saying that “one cannot combat a real evil at the price of a greater evil” (Leiken and Rubin 128). This Nicaraguan Church hierarchy embraced this firm stand against violence throughout the 1970s, even while some clergy openly supported violent means of achieving justice. The Church hierarchy did not begin to openly criticize the regime until 1972 (Monroy García 98). This caused tension between the hierarchy and the politically active clergy who were already becoming involved in the growing revolutionary movement.

In Nicaragua during this time, a growing number of priests and religious orders began to engage in the process of conscientization within their communities. This work was often led by young, foreign clergy “influenced by the new Catholic social doctrine developed in Europe” (Feroohar 67). At first, this work focused primarily on development and self-help programs (Sawchuk 45). However, as time went on, these communities became involved in political action (Monroy García 92). This sector of the Church clashed with the hierarchy, who were still very removed from the communities (Monroy García 93). At the first Pastoral Congress in Managua in 1969, priests openly criticized the Church hierarchy, claiming they were “incapable of effective and constructive leadership for the dioceses...” (Feroohar 71). This tension between hierarchy and the Church leaders who were inspired by liberation theology was present throughout the revolutionary struggle. Next, the paper will outline the insurgency process to contextualize the Christian involvement during this time.

Revolutionary Struggle

The Somoza dictatorship was eventually overthrown in 1979 by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). This socialist organization was founded in 1961 and named after Augusto Sandino (Schroeder). “Their political program emphasized opposition to the Somoza dictatorship (*Somocismo*) and U.S. imperialism; nationalism, democracy, and social justice at home; and political nonalignment abroad” (Schroeder). They proclaimed that Nicaragua was being exploited by the United States and the Somoza dictatorship and they committed to freeing Nicaragua from both (Leiken and Rubin 149). They combined this anti-imperialist rhetoric with an understanding of the class struggle based in the particular needs of the people of Nicaragua. Throughout the revolutionary struggle of the 1970s, the FSLN provided hope of a different future and an organizational structure to help mobilize those who opposed Somoza (Monroy García 103).

Despite the importance of the FSLN in the public imagination, the group remained small throughout the 1970s. They did conduct military offensives that rattled the regime, including their 1974 kidnapping of important figures within the Somoza government (Berryman 69). The radical guerrilla group attacked outposts again in October 1977 and February 1978 (Bye 10). However, it wasn't until the uprising of September 1978 that there was mass participation within the FSLN (Bye 7). The FSLN was not the only group seeking an alternative to the dictatorship. Somoza's 1974 decision to seek re-election angered many within the upper class (Ferozhar 96). In late 1974, Democratic Union of Liberation (UDEL) was formed. This opposition coalition included labor unions, working-class organizations, and members of the both the Conservative and Liberal parties (Ferozhar 98). UDEL attempted to find a solution to the political crisis that

did not include the FSLN (Foroohar 163). Business leaders and political elites were afraid of the dramatic consequences of a full-scale revolution such as that proposed by the FSLN.

Political opposition to Somoza grew throughout the 1970s. The first major event that weakened the regime's grip on the country was the Managua earthquake of 1972. On December 23, 1972, an earthquake destroyed a large portion of Managua, killing 10,000 people and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless (Berryman 65). The regime grossly mishandled the situation. Rather than provide leadership, the country was left teetering on the edge of anarchy while the National Guard sold stolen items on the black market (Leiken and Rubin 139-140). The National Guard also siphoned off relief aid and kept it from reaching its destination (Leiken and Rubin 140). Rather than reform the National Guard, Somoza increased their profits to ensure their loyalty to him (Leiken and Rubin 140). The scope of the corruption and greed, "began to exhaust the tolerance of significant segments of the upper class" (Berryman 66). In addition, the earthquake increased the suffering of the poor and demonstrated the depths of the government's apathy toward their citizens' wellbeing.

The second definitive event in the revolutionary uprising occurred in January 1978. Prominent journalist Pedro Joaquín Chamorro was assassinated in an attack presumably ordered by Somoza's son (Berryman 78). Chamorro was an important member of UDEL and a powerful voice for change (Berryman 78). His assassination ended any hopes of national reconciliation or dialogue with Somoza. A general strike was called and there were violent encounters with the National Guard (Foroohar 181). The FSLN further established support by a series of successful offensives (Foroohar 183-184). By late July, Somoza had resigned and the FSLN were celebrating their victory in the streets of Managua (Walker *Living in the Shadow* 39-40). Nicaragua suffered 50,000 casualties during the conflict, approximately 2.5% of the total

population (Berryman 88). The country now faced the future with a destroyed economy and “severe shortages of food, medicine, and other basic commodities.” (Schroeder).

Liberation Theology Within the Nicaraguan Church

The Catholic Church was actively involved in this revolutionary struggle. The goal of the following section is to provide examples of how liberation theology was lived out within Nicaragua. It is not intended to be a comprehensive list of how Christians acted politically during this time. Rather, it is a sampling of the CEBs and organizations that worked to bring about liberation for the poor through collaboration with the FSLN. In the analysis section, the paper will return to this process to outline the way in which liberation theology led to action

Solentiname

In 1965, Ernesto Cardenal founded a CEB on the remote Solentiname archipelago in Lake Nicaragua (Dodson and O’Shaughnessy 20). Cardenal was a Nicaraguan Trappist priest and a successful poet (Randall 39). In Solentiname, Cardenal not only presided over mass but also taught painting and poetry classes (Randall 60-61). The CEB utilized a course entitled “the Family of God” which focused on local community topics and was apolitical (Berryman 8). Cardenal describes the method of this CEB saying that “instead of a sermon each Sunday on the Gospel reading, we have a dialogue” (Penyak and Petry 278). This open conversation allowed those who lived on Solentiname to apply the themes of the Gospel to their own particular experiences.

The Solentiname CEB developed political sentiments through these gospel readings. Liberation theology was not an outside philosophy being brought in; rather, through these discussions, people began to understand the implications of their faith within their specific context. Cardenal relates one such dialogue in his book *The Gospel in Solentiname*. The

community was reflecting on Matthew 10:34 which talks about Jesus, saying, “I have come to bring not peace but the sword” (Penyak and Petry 279). One member of the CEB interpreted the passage saying, “Injustice had always reigned on earth. He is coming to put an end to that state of affairs. So he’s coming to fight. But he’s not going to be fighting all alone. He does it with us” (Penyak and Petry 279). Another commented that Jesus was coming to bring a revolution (Penyak and Petry 279). The theological reflection within this base community drew the people into political involvement.

Eventually, the CEB in Solentiname actively participated in FSLN offensives. The community concluded that they had a faith-driven duty to stand in solidarity with those around Nicaragua who faced persecution from the political regime. They discussed that “For this solidarity to be real, they had to lay security, and life, on the line” (Penyak and Petry 281). In October 1977, members from the CEB participated in an unsuccessful FSLN offensive to attack a National Guard garrison (Berryman 23). The surviving combatants fled to Costa Rica while the National Guard destroyed Solentiname property and killed those “suspected of FSLN sympathies” (Berryman 24). Ernesto Cardenal – who openly cast his loyalty with the FSLN – explained why the members of this Christian community engaged in the revolutionary uprising. He said that, “They did it for only one reason: for their love of the kingdom of God, for the ardent desire that a just society be implemented” (Penyak and Petry 281).

Student Movement

Another sector of the society where the Church began to engage in the revolutionary struggle was through student-led political action. High school and college students had periodically organized to oppose Somoza, including a 1959 encounter that resulted in a massacre of the students by the National Guard (Foroohar 144). The institutional Church was wary of this

movement and its ties to communism. To combat this “leftist influence,” the Society of Jesus founded the Central American University (UCA) in 1960 (Berryman 59). However, the students at the UCA began organizing in 1970 to protest the university’s curriculum and support for the Somoza regime (Dodson and O’Shaughnessy 121).

This student-led movement led to collaboration between students and priests. The priests who supported the students were nicknamed “the seven priests of Marx,” even though none of them supported Marxism. In August of 1970, students and priests occupied the cathedral in Managua to bring awareness to human rights violations (Berryman 61). Even though the Episcopal conference condemned this action, there was mass support for the students (Foroohar 77). Fernando Cardenal, a Jesuit priest and the younger brother of Ernesto Cardenal, actively supported this occupation. He said that “we rang the bells every fifteen minutes, day and night, and announced that we will keep doing it until they accept justice and respect the law” (Foroohar 77). After this occupation, nearly 100 of the students were imprisoned and a Jesuit priest involved in the movement – Jose Antonio Sanjinés – was expelled from the country (Berryman 62). This student movement was the beginning of the political radicalization of the Christian youth. It also demonstrated that members of the clergy supported direct political action against the regime.

El Riguero

CEBs were formed throughout Nicaragua, many centered in poor, urban communities such as El Riguero in Managua. In 1971, expelled students from the UCA approached the priest of the parish – Father Uriel Molina – with the idea of forming a Christian community (Randall 127-128). These students had been active in the cathedral occupation and believed that radical reform was needed (Monroy García 93; Berryman 63). The students lived in the neighborhood,

reflected on theology, and analyzed “Nicaragua using Marxism as a method” (Berryman 63). This CEB also started a Bible school and engaged the larger neighborhood in discussions about “the Bible in relation to present-day social problems (Foroohar 79). In the early 1970s, the students helped organize a boycott over milk prices. As part of this boycott, they laid out nails on the roads “to paralyze the transportation of milk on trucks” (Foroohar 78).

El Rigüero grew firmer in their political commitments in the aftermath of the Managua earthquake. In the days following the destruction, the people met on the streets, “singing protest songs and reading biblical passages or poetry” (Foroohar 128). These liturgical practices also had a political component – calling the people to come together to stand for justice (Foroohar 128). These meetings faced political opposition and were broken up by tear gas and bullets by the National Guard (Foroohar 128). This opposition only served to radicalize the community further. The student organizers of the neighborhood began to build contacts with the FSLN. The Revolutionary Christian Movement, founded by these students, openly aligned with the FSLN, saying Christians should “return dignity to dehumanized man” alongside the FSLN (Foroohar 133). The Revolutionary Christian Movement quickly created a network in most poor neighborhoods in Managua that served as “a major pool for FSLN recruitment” (Foroohar 129, 131).

The FSLN became openly welcomed within El Rigüero. The guerrilla organization used parish buildings for their meetings and formed open connections with community leaders (Foroohar 131). A member of the CEB, Alvaro Baltodano, framed the support for the FSLN by saying that the FSLN “gave us the possibility of helping liberate the people and working towards a different world, the kind of world that the Bible talks about” (Foroohar 133). This active support for the FSLN came from their religious convictions. One student affirmed that “My faith

turned into something else, this being political consciousness, revolutionary experience, Sandinismo” (Reed and Pitcher 483). Through theological reflection and community action, many within El Riguero felt compelled to join the revolutionary struggle.

CEPA

In 1969, the Jesuits founded the Evangelical Committee for Agrarian Advancement (CEPA). This development organization sought to train community leaders and provide technical training to agricultural workers (Dodson and O’Shaughnessy 125; Foroohar 151). However, it quickly became apparent that agricultural reform would not occur without political mobilization around issues such as land rights (Dodson and O’Shaughnessy 125). CEPA connected the right to land to religious faith, publishing a “pamphlet entitled ‘Cristo Campesino’” (Christ the Peasant) (Dodson and O’Shaughnessy 125). This liberation-based understanding of Christ portrayed him as a fellow worker who struggled with the people in their quest for economic and political justice. The training and conscientization that CEPA provided in these rural areas led to political mobilization.

The radicalization of CEPA led it into direct contact with the FSLN. Those trained by CEPA challenged landowners by organizing collectively (Foroohar 151). This caused resistance within the hierarchy of the Nicaraguan Church. By 1975 there were intense disagreements about the nature of the organization and how to handle its increasing activism (Berryman 71). Under pressure from the Church, many priests resigned in 1977 and the Jesuits eventually severed all connections with CEPA (Foroohar 152; Berryman 71). CEPA faced severe repression from the National Guard and many of their communities “were destroyed or driven underground” (Foroohar 151). By 1978, the hidden network of CEPA was actively collaborating with the FSLN through the Rural Workers Association (Berryman 337).

Delegates of the Word

Another conscientization work occurring in rural communities was the training of Delegates of the Word. This program was created in Honduras during the 1960s to train religious lay leaders. The Delegates were taught how to facilitate mass and Biblical discussion within their communities (Aragón). This process allowed the creation of CEBs in areas where priests were scarce. These Delegates became important community leaders and were crucial links between the Church and the community. The religious groups led by the Delegates became important actors within the FSLN (Aragón).

One region of the country where Delegates of the Word were particularly active was the Zelaya district on the Eastern side of the country. The communities there were often isolated from one another due to the tough physical terrain and lack of infrastructure (Feroohar 146). In 1968, the Capuchin religious order began to work among the Miskito tribe to train Delegates of the Word (Feroohar 147). By 1971, they had also helped create agricultural clubs in fifty-seven villages run by Miskito Leaders (Feroohar 147). In the entire Zelaya district, the Capuchins trained more than 900 Delegates (Berryman 70). The Capuchins approached their work through the lens of conscientization, helping the people work together to “value their dignity as the children of God, and to realize their rights according to the Nicaraguan Political Constitution...” (Feroohar 147).

This community organizing work was met by violent oppression from the National Guard. The rural regions were a major site of government oppression, as people were ousted from their land, jailed, and killed indiscriminately (Feroohar 149). As the support for the FSLN grew in rural areas, the National Guard started cracking down on guerrilla operators in the region. These offensives killed thousands of noncombatants in the rural areas (Berryman 70).

The National Guard came to view the agricultural groups and CEBs as potentially subversive (Foroohar 148). However, jailing members of these groups served only to radicalize them, as they came into contact with FSLN fighters while in jail (Foroohar 149).

In 1976, the Capuchins published a report documenting the violence in the countryside. They published a list of the hundreds of people harmed or murdered at the hands of the National Guard and called out Somoza's involvement in this violence (Berryman 71). This publication garnered international attention, compelling the Church hierarchy to criticize Somoza directly. However, this publication only intensified the violence done against the Delegates in the rural regions. In the Zelaya district, the National Guard "used twenty-six chapels as barracks and torture centers and as places to rape the peasant women. Lay leaders were singled out for arrest and torture" (Foroohar 156). This violence motivated many to join the FSLN as fighters while churches provided shelter, food, and medicine to the Sandinistas (Klaiber 199).

Gaspar García Laviana

Another important element of Christian involvement in the revolutionary uprising in Nicaragua was the open alignment of priests with the FSLN. As leaders in the community, the decisions of a priest set a precedent for members of the laity. One such priest was Gaspar García Laviana, a Spanish missionary from the Sacred Heart Congregation (Berryman 76). In December 1977, he announced that he was joining the FSLN as a combatant, saying that the people needed "more than the consolation of words, the consolation of actions" (Berryman 76). His powerful message denounced the Somoza dictatorship as a sin, declaring he would "fight to my last breath for the coming of the kingdom of justice in our country" (Berryman 77). He fled to Costa Rica to join the FSLN, dying in a skirmish in 1978 (Klaiber 199). Throughout the 1970s, priests

continued to cast their lot with the FSLN, citing their belief in liberation as the driving factor in their militancy.

Church Hierarchy

This process of eventual alignment with the FSLN did not occur within all sectors of the Church. This was especially evident in the hierarchy of the Nicaraguan Church, who refused to accept the radical position of the FSLN. The following section, which relates the hierarchy's position during the 1970s, is intended to add depth to the understanding of how the Church interacted in the revolutionary movement. The hierarchy, although in principle committed to the cause of the poor, did not fully embrace liberation theology.

Even as liberation theology was being lived out among the Church within Nicaragua, the hierarchy of the Church were slow to criticize the Somoza regime. Their social action plan was "based on philanthropy and reform, not revolution" (Sawchuk 42). In 1971 and 1972, they called on Christians to work for a "more just political and social order" but did not advocate for Somoza's removal (Sawchuk 42). At the same time, the Church was becoming a place where people could express political discontent and the Church grew more vocal about supporting the people directly (Berryman 68). However, a sign of their continued complacency with the regime was evident in their response to the Managua earthquake. Rather than blaming Somoza directly for the incompetence and economic consequences, they criticized the type of international aid that Nicaragua was receiving (Sawchuk 42; Foroohar 94). These calls for social action, without directly challenging the political regime, show the unwillingness or inability of the Church hierarchy to separate themselves from the Somozas.

The hierarchy began to directly criticize the regime only as Somoza became incredibly unpopular. Before the rigged September 1974 election, the Somozas arrested and disenfranchised

twenty-seven business and political leaders who had published a statement declaring “There’s no one to vote for” (Berryman 69). In response, the bishops released a statement in August defending the right to dissent (Berryman 69). Rather than being influenced by the grassroots CEBS, the hierarchy echoed the attitudes of the bourgeoisie. When the upper class began to openly oppose Somoza, the Church hierarchy did so as well (Sawchuk 42). The Church hierarchy may have believed in the ideals of liberation. However, the timeline of their opposition to Somoza suggests that they were primarily influenced by the need to maintain their power in a world of shifting political alliances.

Even as the hierarchy confronted the Somoza regime, they actively opposed radical alternatives such as the FSLN. They maintained that peaceful resolution of the conflict was the only ethical way to resolve the problems currently facing the nation. In 1977, Obando y Bravo attempted to create a national dialogue that excluded the voice of the FSLN (Foroohar 168). This hesitance to fully support the FSLN was attributed to the incompatibility of violence with Christian faith. In an article published in 1977, the Archbishop of Managua, Miguel Obando y Bravo, advocated for a non-violent resistance. He said it would allow people “to be revolutionary without renouncing Christianity, and to be faithful to Christ, without renouncing the revolution” (Foroohar 170). This desire for a “sincere and real dialogue” was also a way to preserve the Church’s own interests and prevent a radical change of the system by which the Church currently benefitted (Foroohar 175). However, national dialogue eventually proved unsuccessful.

In the final stages of the revolutionary movement, the hierarchy reluctantly affirmed the people’s right to open rebellion. However, they still sought to maintain their primacy in the new system and prevent a total FSLN victory. As late as August 1978, the bishops firmly rejected violence, saying that “Centuries of Christian faith and cultural values should not be swept away

in a wave of hatred and madness, in a collective self-destruction” (Foroohar 190). They advocated for Somoza’s resignation to “allow a transition to electoral democracy with a substantial reform component” (Berryman 83). However, by May 1979, the hierarchy conceded that an insurrection was justifiable “when all other means have failed” (Berryman 87). Despite this support, the bishops were still clearly concerned about the Church’s place within the new political system constructed by the FSLN. This concern was seen clearly in their statement on June 2nd which maintained that “We consider as indispensable the acceptance of pluralism of ideas and political postures” (Foroohar 198). The hierarchy was not motivated as entirely by the tenets of liberation theology. They were influenced by their class position and their interest in preserving the Church’s primacy in the post-revolutionary Nicaragua.

Post-Revolution

The Sandinista victory in July of 1979 created a new socialist and nationalistic government. The victory was welcomed by the vast majority of those within the Church as they looked towards a new restructuring of the Nicaraguan government. Prominent priests such as Father D’Escoto and the Cardenal brothers took important positions within the new government: foreign minister, minister of culture, and minister of education (escoto service web; Randall 33;40, 290). Other clergy and laity of the Church worked in the government, schools, and hospitals (Randall 31). Upon coming to power, the FSLN focused their efforts on increasing “social security and social welfare” (Walker 73). To that end, they began a program of agricultural reform focused on land redistribution. This program helped more than 100,000 people gain access to land (Walker 73). The FSLN also launched a successful literacy campaign “which, in 1980, reduced the country’s illiteracy rate from 53 per cent to just over 12 per cent of the population” (Randall 34). Priests and laity of the Church worked alongside the FSLN to bring

about the success of these social campaigns. The FSLN also guaranteed to respect the freedom of religious beliefs within the new system (Norsworthy and Barry 120).

The Church quickly became divided over the relationship with the Sandinista government. The hierarchy of the Church, while initially supportive of the new government, grew increasingly hostile to it. This initial support can be seen in a pastoral letter from November 1979 that attempted to define the concept of socialism and how socialism could fit within a Christian perspective (Leiken and Rubin 213). However, once the bourgeois members of the coalition government resigned in April 1980, the hierarchy became vocal in their opposition to the government (Löwy 101). Obando y Bravo tried to unite the Church against the Sandinista government, perceiving it as “an external enemy that constitutes a threat to religion and the church” (Klaiber 200). The Church itself was split by these two opposing viewpoints. A 1982 survey of 220 priests revealed that “46 percent supported the Sandinista experiment and the rest were opposed” (Klaiber 201). As the 1980s wore on, Obando y Bravo became a major figure in the opposition to the Sandinistas.

Liberation Theology within the Church

This hesitance surrounding liberation theology and its implications within Nicaragua matched a larger trend within the Catholic Church. Beginning in the 1970s, Church authorities had begun to question the prominence and acceptability of liberation theology. This debate touched on the “organization of power within the Church, the nature of capitalist society, and the desirability of socialist revolution” (Sawchuk 49). The Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) became increasingly conservative during this time and the Vatican took issue with liberation theology’s connection to Marxism (Löwy 33; Cleary 202). Pope John Paul II, who

became pope in 1978, “imposed rigid internal discipline on the clergy” to stem the tide of liberation theology (Hughes 261). He appointed conservative bishops and censured liberal ones.

One of the most famous instances of this censure of liberation theology was the Pope’s 1983 visit to Nicaragua, in which he ordered the priests who held positions in the government to resign (Löwy 101). The pope also called “the church of the poor... an internal enemy” because it threatened church orthodoxy and harmony (Nepstad 116). In 1984, the Vatican published *Instruction on Certain Aspects of ‘The Theology of Liberation,’* which attacked some strands of liberation theology “which seriously departs from the faith of the Church” (Sigmund 55). It asserted that the use of Marxist ideology and hermeneutics rooted in rationalism were “corrupting whatever was authentic in the general initial commitment in behalf of the poor” (Sigmund 55).

This reactionary tone toward liberation theology could be clearly seen at the CELAM conference in Puebla in 1979. The Church hierarchy expressed concerns about the implications of liberation theology and the radical posture it encouraged. While there was still strong support for the CEBs, the main point of contention was the use of violence within the Church. Pope John Paul II, who spoke at the conference, stated that “This conception of Christ as a political figure, a revolutionary, as the subversive from Nazareth, does not tally with the Church’s catechesis” (Dodson and O’Shaughnessy 110). The dialogue between liberation theology and Marxism was a major point of contention. The conference attempted to distance the Church from this kind of political involvement – despite the fact that the Church and State had frequently been close actors throughout most of Latin American history. They blamed Marxism for leading to “the total politicization of Christian existence, the disintegration of the language of faith into that of

the social sciences, and the draining away of the transcendental dimension of Christian salvation” (Berryman 353).

This conservative wave that swept through the Church worried that liberation theology strayed too far from Church doctrine by focusing so much on temporal liberation. The debate surrounding liberation theology was never about solely the theology; it was about maintaining Church unity, the role of the Church within society, and the differing views about the use of violence as a means of liberation. The CEBs had created a source of lay power that was largely out of the reach of the bishops and the Vatican. The hierarchy of the Church had an interest in re-establishing their role and containing both the theology and the ramifications of the theology within Nicaragua and Latin America at the time.

Liberation Theology as a Social Movement: Decline

In addition to the institutional backlash, liberation theology lost steam throughout the 1980s as it struggled to adapt to the changing world. One of the main political factors was the global collapse of Marxism as an acceptable political alternative. This dramatic collapse of Marxism – symbolized by the fall of the Berlin wall in 1991 – accentuated that the “political and economic assumptions” about the world had shifted since the 1960s and 1970s (Chaves 121). Because of the significant connection between Marxism and liberation theology, the public disgrace of Marxism also damaged liberation theology. Relatedly, many people began to feel that liberation theology’s exclusive focus on social class and the preferential option for the poor was not limiting this rhetoric to a class struggle (Levine, “Religious Change” 22). Liberation theology failed to address other aspects of one's identity, including “gender, cultural, and ethnic concerns” (Chaves 120). Movements focusing on these particular identities grew out of liberation theology and relied heavily on the methodological framework it helped establish.

Analysis

Now that the paper has laid out the historical narrative, it will turn to an analysis of the experience of liberation theology within Nicaragua. The goal of this analysis is to better understand why religion led to social action within Nicaragua and the larger implications of that interaction. The first section outlines the process of political conscientization within these Christian communities. It is important to keep in mind that each community went through a unique process that may or may not have ended with participation in the FSLN. This section is not meant to account for every experience; its purpose is to provide a broad framework of the general trend. From there, the analysis connects liberation theology to the three social movement theories described earlier: resource mobilization theory, new social movement theory, and the political process model. The paper will conclude by offering four insights about what liberation theology suggests about the power of religion to inspire social action.

How Liberation Theology Led to Action

The communities associated with liberation theology did not spring up overnight. Rather, there was a process whereby the traditional theology of the Catholic Church was transformed to fit the people's reality. As they explored the implications of their beliefs, these communities became more engaged in the work of social and political action. This action created a cycle of action leading to further theological reflection. As priests and religious orders became immersed in their communities, they continued to apply and think critically about their theological beliefs – living out the praxis-based methodology of liberation theology. Understanding this process more fully, supplemented by historical examples, gives a clearer understanding of how religious beliefs led the people to participate in this violent uprising.

There are six main steps of this process that allowed liberation theology to move theological reflection to political action. The six steps are as follows: development work, conscientization, theological reflection, political and social engagement, political repression, and collaboration with the FSLN. It is important to remember these are not necessarily the sequential order that every community followed. For some, political repression sparked community activism while in others it was a constant cycle of theological reflection and leading to political activism which led to theological reflection. Every community was distinct. The purpose of this section is not to account for every experience within Nicaragua. Rather, it is to give a framework to help understand how beliefs translated to action within the region.

Development Work

In order for liberation theology to spread throughout the country, the Church had to establish contact with areas where it had previously had little influence. The Nicaraguan Church had few links to poorer neighborhoods and the rural regions. However, in the 1960s and early 1970s, partially in response to institutional reforms such as Vatican II, large numbers of priests and religious workers began working in these communities. These priests, who typically were favorable to the ideas of liberation theology, were “converted to the cause of the poor laity” with whom they worked (Sawchuk 41). The involvement of these priests, student leaders, and foreign missionary orders connected the theology of liberation to the poor communities in Nicaragua. These priests were the intellectual forefront of liberation theology as they helped guide community discussions and enacted changes within their parish.

At first, the work conducted by this group was apolitical, focusing on community renewal and personal morality. In the mid-1960s, Father José de la Jara began work among the San Pablo Parish in Managua. His work focused on expanding the definition of a Church from a physical

building to “a community of brothers and sisters” (Löwy 95). These community meetings were apolitical, stressing “family and Christian community” (Berryman 60). All over the country, similar movements were occurring that focused on community development. In 1964, four Capuchin priests arrived in Jalapa, a rural region in the north of the country. They founded groups known as the “Family of God,” which focused on improving Christian morality through work with families and youth (Feroohar 150). There was also a significant work within the Church for development projects such as clinics or literacy training (Berryman 332).

Many of the Christian communities who eventually became part of the revolutionary struggle were founded in a development lens. In the early 1970s, the Maryknoll sisters became involved creating youth clubs in a poor neighborhood outside of Managua named OPEN 3. The Managua earthquake of 1972 led to a large influx of people in the community (Feroohar 135). Conditions in the area were dehumanizing; there was little electricity, no running water, and over 50% of the people were unemployed (Feroohar 136). The Maryknoll sisters were able to see firsthand the “regime’s indifference to the poor and its desire to profit at the expense of their misery” (Dodson and O’Shaughnessy 124). Relief supplies did not reach the neighborhood, stuck in the corrupted web of the Somoza regime. Through first-hand experience living within these poor communities, priests and other workers within the Catholic Church began to realize that this apolitical, self-help framework was insufficient to truly help the people experience liberation. Slowly, the communities and programs began to focus more on building dignity in the people and helping them see how their faith could impact their daily lives.

Conscientization

As time went on, the focus in many of these communities shifted from development work and morality training to work with more political implications. This shift occurred both within

the mindset of the priests and in those of the community members, who realized that these programs and communities were insufficient to truly enact positive change in their communities. One Maryknoll sister working in the OPEN 3 neighborhood put it this way when she said that “The most basic needs of the people wouldn’t be met, couldn’t be met” (Foroohar 138). As Catholic workers came to this realization, they began to focus more on enhancing the dignity of humanity as image bearers of God (Berryman 332). This recognition of their dignity was not limited to the religious sphere. These consciousness-raising programs also taught people to “realize their rights according to the Nicaraguan Political Constitution” (Foroohar 147). In OPEN 3, the communities founded by the Maryknolls “questioned the possibilities of achieving such dignity under the Somoza government” (Dodson and O’Shaughnessy 133-134). The affirmation of the value of the people, and the implications of this recognition, was a critical step in the transition from strictly developmental work to political activism. Those working among the people recognized that in order for there to be true liberation, the dignity of the people would have to be realized in all aspects of life, including in the political sphere. They were committed to working alongside them as they struggled to realize their dignity in all spheres of life.

The people themselves began to live into this affirmation of their dignity. The consciousness-raising programs helped the people hope for the possibility of change, both in their community and beyond. Community groups such as San Pablo – “gave its members...a feeling a personal dignity and collective initiative” (Löwy 95). Groups like these helped the people establish an individual and collective identity. The conscientization helped them see how that identity connects to the larger community of Nicaragua, creating the possibility for national change. For so long, the theology of the Catholic Church was fatalistic about the conditions of people’s lives. In these consciousness-raising programs, that element of fatalism was eliminated

(Foroohar 154). People saw their dignity rooted in their faith and then were able to reflect on how that humanity was being denied by the current political system. This led to further theological reflection and community organization around these issues.

Theological Reflection

These communities also engaged in the theological reflection that is at the heart of liberation theology. This theological reflection was rooted in their particular community and was achieved through discussion and reflection. The people, rather than solely the Church leaders, played a role in the creation of the theology. The communities began to realize that the theology of the Catholic Church was “was “actively legitimating this lethal social system” (Reed and Pitcher 483). The theology itself was changed “so that it actually promotes, rather than violates, the gospel imperatives of love and evangelization” (Reed and Pitcher 483). A clear example of this process of theological change can be seen through the Solentiname CEB. One member, Manuel, said that

Those who taught us that religion, and said that we shouldn't hate anybody, had us supporting Somoza's government. In that sense we supported Somoza. Religion taught us that we had to have a dictator there, for God had put him there, that we had to spend our time praying for this man to be happy (Randall 71).

Through these reflections, communities came to realize that there was another form of religious belief that did not involve tacit support for oppression.

This theological reflection further allowed these community groups to act as religious and political leaders. Previously, the religious authority in the strictly hierarchical Catholic Church stemmed from the bishops and the Vatican. In liberation theology, this pattern was broken down as theology was worked out within these CEBs among lay people. The people had the

opportunity to engage in theological reflection while contextualizing that reflection within their own community. This act of community involvement – linked to a strong religious base for that involvement – had powerful implications. In Nicaragua, these “grass roots religious groups were often the first and only experience of getting together that reaches beyond family, village, or neighborhood” (Levine, “Religious Change” 28). Bringing people together in these communities and providing them with the tools of religious reflection set the stage for involvement in social and political action.

Political and Social Engagement

As the communities further established the theological justification for their actions, they became more active politically. They began organizing over community issues, participating in political protests, and indirectly supporting the work of the FSLN. In 1974, youth in the Jalapa parish created a group called *Espíritu Santo* to “pursue a more just society” (Foroohar 150). With a Bible in one hand and the labor code in the other, they visited local ranchers to advocate for the workers (Foroohar 150). They also visited political prisoners in jail and pressed for their release (Foroohar 150). This group maintained their religious convictions while they fought against injustice within society. Their desire for a just society compelled them to form active communities that engaged in political action.

Around the country, CEBs were critical in growing protest movements against the regime. In urban settings, neighborhoods such as OPEN 3 were increasingly the scene of demonstrations and anti-government rhetoric. In 1976, OPEN 3 engaged in a battle to reduce water prices, which the government had selectively raised in poorer neighborhoods. The Christian Youth clubs and community groups that had been established were quick to activate their resources in support of the fight (Dodson and O'Shaughnessy 134). The success of this

campaign after three months helped the community enhance “their confidence to act politically” (Dodson and O’Shaughnessy 134). This created a reinforcing cycle of increasing community involvement and strengthened organizational capacity. However, this political involvement also invoked a harsh response from the government.

Political Repression

As the political situation became more tense – and these religious communities became more politically active – they faced intense oppression from the Somoza government. The National Guard deemed many of these groups to be subversive. In the urban setting, protests and community organizing was met with violence from the government. In 1977, Open 3 organized a protest of the abysmal public transport system that connected their community to Managua (Feroohar 140). When the people of OPEN 3 came to Managua to protest, the National Guard assaulted the demonstrators (Feroohar 140). Several days later, the National Guard “attacked a group of nuns and priests in front of the Maryknolls’ house in the barrio [neighborhood], beating up a priest, two nuns, and a lay missionary” (Feroohar 140). This experience only strengthened the community’s commitment to this struggle. In a letter published by the Maryknollers after this incident, they said that “we cannot sit with our arms crossed in our convents...Our role is to be with the people in their struggle to achieve a life of dignity and justice” (Feroohar 140). The government’s harsh crackdown on these community movements only served to strengthen people’s opposition to the Somoza regime.

This repression was particularly brutal in the rural regions. As mentioned previously, the Delegates of the Word in the Zelaya region were targeted for torture and assassination by the National Guard (Feroohar 156). In the rural region of Yali, Father Miguel Vasquez was denounced as a communist and leader of a guerrilla unit because he had helped organize CEBs

(Dodson and O'Shaughnessy 129). By 1974, all thirty-two CEBs in the area were declared subversive and were subjected to violence by the National Guard (Foroohar 157). This political repression further radicalized the groups by forcing them underground where they established contacts with the FSLN. It also showed how true liberation could never be achieved under the Somoza regime. As a result, the message and practice of many of these Christian communities grew more radical.

Collaboration with the FSLN

Ultimately, the theological commitments of liberation theology led many Christians into active involvement within the FSLN. "The areas where the struggle was more intensive, and the action best organized and effective, were precisely those where CEBs, Delegates of the Word and radical Christians had been active in the preceding years" (Löwy 98). These communities had engaged in the process of community organization coupled with theological reflection. Many saw the revolutionary struggle and the FSLN as the best way to achieve the liberation of the people. Alvaro Baltadono, a member of the El Rigüero CEB, put it this way when he said, "For us to be Christian meant to work with those who were poorest and at the time it meant working with the Sandinista Front" (Foroohar 132-133). Some of the Catholic workers did not view themselves as active members of the FSLN, but did affirm the people's right to participate in these protests and the revolutionary struggle (Berryman 333). This support drew them into the armed conflict even while they were not fighting alongside the FSLN.

During the final stages of the conflict, the CEBs were active members in the revolutionary struggle. On February 21st, 1978, a Christian community in the Monimbó neighborhood of Masaya was attacked by the National Guard while holding a mass calling for justice for Pedro Joaquín Chamorro (Berryman 80). Somoza then ordered the bombing of certain

areas of Masaya while the people counterattacked “using firearms and homemade contact bombs” (Foroohar 185). One of the members of this community, Maria Chavarria, explained that in the fight with the National Guard, “We didn’t see anyone but our children; we were, and are, of the Frente” (Berryman 81). One priest expressed the magnitude of the support for the FSLN when he said that “Everyone was Christian and everyone was a Sandinista” (Berryman 88). These people participated in the Sandinista front “because of religious conviction and hatred for Somocista despotism” (Dodson and O’Shaughnessy 10). The theology of liberation was a powerful force that both inspired and grew out of community organization. The political engagement of these Christian groups within the Sandinista front shows how religion can play a powerful role within social movements.

Connection to Social Movement Theory

Another way to understand the relationship between liberation theology and political action is to look at it through the lens of social movement theory. The purpose of connecting it to social movement theory is to further understand how liberation theology was able to be an effective source for social action. Social movement theory allows for analysis of specific elements of religion: such as existing institutional power, community organization, and religious beliefs. It also provides a framework for how religion could impact social movements in the future. Examining several social movement theories provides a fuller picture of the impact of religion on social movements.

Resource Mobilization Theory

As discussed earlier in the paper, resource mobilization theory posits that resources are essential to the emergence and success of a social movement (Kirmani 8). According to resource mobilization, it is imperative to examine the organizational structure surrounding a movement to

understand how and why it emerged. It suggests that in order for a social movement to occur, there needs to be an organizational framework and resources that encourage its development (Zald 322). In the context of liberation theology, the resources and organizational framework came from the institution of the Catholic Church.

The organizational structures that were created through liberation theology helped the revolutionary movement. The programs of conscientization helped establish the organizational structures that would be critical in the support of the FSLN. The El Riguero community recognized that “We had developed a kind of political structure throughout the neighborhood” (Berryman 156). These CEBs also were able to use institutional resources such as parish buildings, Church money, pre-existing leadership, and established communication networks (Zald 322; Smith, “Correcting” 15). One particular example of this resource mobilization can be seen in the 1976 protest of OPEN 3 over water rights. Not only were Christians were key actors in the fight, but the protest was able to use the church building for meetings and its mimeograph machines to make notices (Dodson and O'Shaughnessy 134). Another importance use of the physical resources of the Catholic Church was the widespread occupation of churches and cathedrals by the student movement in the early 1970s. Had these semi-autonomous spaces not been available, the process of activism would have looked differently. It is interesting to note that in certain regions of Latin America, not only in Nicaragua, the Church was often the only community organization operating because dictators or other repressive regimes recognized its “longstanding political influence and widespread respect and connections” (Smith, “Correcting” 21). Because this was the only semi-independent organization, it would be expected that social movements would occur from within it.

Resource mobilization theory fails to account for the process by which these institutions were created. Although the Catholic Church was well-established in Nicaragua, it had little contact with the people and had no presence in the countryside (Dodson and O'Shaughnessy 117). Only by the work of priests and religious workers did liberation-theology based institutions begin to form. These leaders had a certain level of independence from the bishops and played “an important role in facilitating religious innovation” (Pattnayak, “Embeddedness” 199). That religious innovation led to the formation of these organizations and communities. Resource mobilization theory draws attention to the role that resources play in shaping revolutionary uprisings. However, it does not fully address the emergence of these resources.

New Social Movement Theory

Another way to examine the growth of liberation theology is to look at it from the framework of new social movement theory. This theory focuses on social movements that center around the “struggle over symbolic, information, and cultural resources” (Kirmani 10). It emphasizes the power of emotion, culture, and identity (Kirmani 11). Liberation theology held cultural power during this time. It connected the deep-held beliefs of the people to concrete political action. This strong language is seen in the way that the people described their faith and its connections to the political world. In the early 1970s, the Nicaraguan people adapted the liturgy of a Catholic mass to express liberation themes. This Nicaraguan peasant mass, written by Carlos Mejía Godoy, shows the deep connection between faith and action. It says, “Christ, Christ Jesus, / be in solidarity. / Not with the oppressor class / which exploits and devours / the community / but with the oppressed / with my people / who thirst for peace” (Penyak and Petry 282). Liberation theology provided strong emotional and spiritual significance. This gave merit to the social movement and inspired people to action.

Another important facet of new social movement theory is the assertion that it is not the most marginalized actors who actually create this movement (Kirmani 13). This addresses an important reality in Nicaragua. Although the poor and marginalized Nicaraguans became major actors in the movement, liberation theology was introduced and established through the work of priests, religious orders, and an active student movement. These were relatively wealthy members of the society. Their privileged position allowed them to create many of these structures. These leaders “are examples of intermediate level forces that could play an important role in facilitating religious innovation” (Pattnayak, “Embeddedness” 199). It was only through cooperation with these pre-existing leaders and more privileged classes were the poorer sections of society able to organize and mobilize for change.

Political Process Model

The final social movement theory that this section will make connections to is the political process model. This model suggests the necessity of political opportunities, an allied organization, and a social-psychological components for a successful social movement (Smith, *Emergence* 59). When looking at Nicaragua, it is clear that the macro-level factors influenced the creation of the insurgency movement and the Christian involvement in it. A crucial turning point in the Christian involvement in the revolutionary struggle was the Managua earthquake of 1972. The devastation of the earthquake, coupled with the greed and incompetence of the regime, caused many working within the Church to take “the first steps toward a prophetic interpretation of their religious mission” (Dodson and O’Shaughnessy 124). However, it was not enough to simply recognize that the economic and political realities around them were unacceptable. There was also an internalization of these realities and a response to them on the social and psychological level.

Liberation theology was able to provide the insurgent consciousness necessary to spark change. This collective realization of the necessity and ability for change was deeply rooted in the people's theological reflection (Smith, *Emergence* 62). In communities such as Solentiname, the people examined the macro-level factors, but also interpreted the significance and implications of these factors. They compared the Somozas to the Herods of the Bible and saw parallels between their time and the time of the birth of Jesus in that both were filled with "terror and repression" (Berryman 10). Liberation theology provided the means of interpretation of reality and was critical in the creation of this insurgent consciousness.

Broader Implications

The historical analysis of the Christian experience in Nicaragua speaks to the power of religion within social movements. The people of Nicaragua were able to connect their faith with their particular political and social situation and effect change. This challenges the notion that religion acts conservatively within a society. The paper will first consider the historical particularity of the analysis, noting the decline of liberation theology within Nicaragua. From there, it will conclude by offering four reasons why religion can have and has had a significant role in social movements. Religion constructs meaning, creates community, speaks from a moral authority, and sparks hope.

Historical Particularity of the Analysis

By its nature, liberation theology is tied to the specific time and place in which it was created. Because it drew on praxis to establish its theological beliefs, it specifically addressed the political and economic realities of its era. Liberation theology within Nicaragua responded to the physical world around it and spoke into that reality. In the 1970s, those inspired by liberation theology were able to work with the FSLN to enact revolutionary change. The Nicaraguan

revolution provided a fusion between “Christian ethics and revolutionary hopes” (Löwy 94). Liberation theology found a practical method for implementing change by interfacing with Marxism (Andrade 109). The circumstances of social action were specific to Nicaragua in the 1970s. It is important to keep this historical particularity in mind when analyzing the impact of religion in social movement.

Liberation theology as a social movement has faded out within Latin America. As mentioned previously, it faced institutional backlash and a hostile international environment. As circumstances changed, people interpreted religious beliefs differently. In Nicaragua, there has been a growth in an understanding of religion that is less oriented toward social activism (Aragón). It is also worth noting that the religiosity of the country has changed. “In 1979, an estimated 80 percent of all Nicaraguans belonged to the Catholic Church (Norsworthy and Barry 120). A 2017 survey found that only 46 percent of Nicaraguans identify as Catholics (“2018 Report”). It is beyond the scope of this paper to ponder the results of these demographic shifts on religion within Nicaragua. However, it is by no means conclusive that secularization is inevitable in Latin America or in other parts of the world (Smith, “Correcting” 4). If anything, liberation theology is a testament to the fact that the relative influence of religion among the general population can change quickly. Religion has played a significant role in social movements and will continue to do so.

Religion within Social Movements

Religion undoubtedly has the potential to act conservatively within society. “By endowing life as it *is* with significance and purpose, religion provides a legitimation for the world as it is” (Smith, “Correcting” 6). It can contextualize poverty and injustice within a framework of divine will or fatalistic acceptance. Religion also functions conservatively when it

“diverts attention away from earthly conditions to the heavens as the source of salvation from the woes of life” (Kearney 8). These understandings of religion lead to an apathetic approach to social problems. However, religion does not always act as a conservative force. Religion also acts as a prophetic voice, calling for the “active transformation of the world” (Volf 6). When religion advocates for change, it can be a powerful force within social movements.

Significance

Religion provides an important sense of significance for those who believe in its message. Religious belief allows people to see how their lives connect to the larger narrative of human history. It connects them to “sets of beliefs and practices grounded not in the ordinary, mundane world, but in the divine, the transcendent, the eternal, the holy, the spiritual” (Smith, “Correcting” 5). Religion speaks to the fundamental truths of life and as such, gives great “significance and purpose” (Smith, “Correcting” 6). This creation of meaning can be seen within liberation theology through the process of conscientization. People reflected critically about their historical position in the world and the action that their faith demanded of them. It was this two-part process – historical awareness and religious meaning of that reality – that provided people with a dynamic source of motivation.

The meaning helps sustain social movements. Without the sense that they are fighting for something bigger than themselves, people quickly lose the willingness to sacrifice that is necessary for sustained social action. Liberation theology shows how powerful religious beliefs were in the revolutionary struggle. Christians were willing to risk their lives and their community’s safety to fight for the liberation of the people. When people engage in social action because of their religious beliefs, they have the “symbolic and emotional resources needed to sustain that activism over time” (Smith “Correcting” 11). They know why they are engaging in

the fight because they connect their religious beliefs to the social movement. In other words, religion provides the “symbolic linkage between their activism and their personal lives” (Hund and Benford 448). Religion can be a driving factor in social movement participation because of the profound and significance it gives to people.

Community

Religion not only creates a deep sense of meaning on an individual level; it frames this meaning within a community. Religion is seldom, if ever, an individual expression. Rather, it occurs within a specific community that also shares these convictions and practices. This shared perspective helps provide “a source of collective identity in the face of oppression” (Kirmani 31). Those inspired by religion come to view themselves as part of a larger group. This collective identity encourages solidarity with others (Smith, “Correcting” 2, 11). Solidarity – an “identification with a collectivity such that an individual feels as if a common cause and fate are shared” – is a crucial component for the development of social movements (Hund and Bedford 439).

Religious communities can play an important role within social movements. Social movements need “sacred, expressive practices” to establish this solidarity and “draw inspiration and strength in difficult times” (Smith “Correcting” 11). Religion is an important source of the sacred expressions that can help nurture “political mobilization” (Smith “Correcting” 11). One example of the powerful sense of solidarity that religious practices can provide is seen in the Nicaraguan Peasant Mass. This mass expresses the belief that Jesus stands with the people, saying “You are resurrected / in each arm that is raised / to defend the people / from exploitative rule” (Penyak and Petry 283). Because Jesus is fighting with the poor, they have a duty to stand with each other. They describe the act of communion – a deeply symbolic practice within the

Catholic Church – through the lens of solidarity with others. Communion is “commitment and life, / a raising of Christian consciousness; / it is to share the fight / for community, / it says: I am Christian / and on me, brother, you can count” (Penyak and Petry 284). Religion provides the community and the corporate practices that maintain the solidarity necessary for social action.

Moral Authority

Religion has the ability to condemn social realities from a morally authoritative standpoint. Because it is based on a higher moral standard, “it stands in the position to question, judge, and condemn temporal, earthly reality” (Smith “Correcting” 6). Religion has “sacred transcendence” for those who believe in it (Smith “Correcting” 6). Religion has a separate value system than that of the society. This absolute moral framework is then able to judge the relative political or social situation of a society (Smith “Correcting” 7). When religion criticizes a social or political situation, it bases its authority in the “ultimacy and sacredness associated with God’s will” (Smith, “Correcting” 9). When this moral authority endorses a social movement, it has a greater impact than a secular justification for action.

Hope

A final element that distinguishes religion as an important factor in social movements is its ability to inspire hope. Liberation theology was so impactful precisely because it addressed people’s physical situations while providing hope for the future (Spickard). Gustavo Gutiérrez maintained that hope – although intangible – “affects the shape and physical quality of our world” (Muskus 69). It inspires people to mobilize, protest, and fight. Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff put it this way when he said that the principle of hope is “a fundamental energy of the human being” (Andrade 108). This hope is essential for social movements. Without a belief in the possibility of success, social movement cannot endure (Andrade 107).

Religion has a unique ability to inspire this hope. Ernest Bloch, a German philosopher, says that religion is “one of the richest expressions of the *principle of hope*”(Löwy 15). Religion provides an abiding hope based in sacred texts and traditions. Bloch also maintained that “in its protest and rebellious forms, religion is one of the most significant forms of *utopian* consciousness” (Löwy 15). It paints a vision of what could be, inspiring people to work for a better future. Those galvanized by liberation theology shared a belief that change was possible (Berryman 17). That religious base for hope is not exclusive to liberation theology. Religion believes in the possibility of change and provides a utopic vision of what could be.

Conclusion

Liberation theology was a powerful source for political action within Nicaragua. By proclaiming that God works throughout history to liberate the oppressed, it called on the Church to do the same. In Latin America, people used this belief to work toward a more equitable and just world. Those inspired by liberation theology within Nicaragua were able to find that avenue for change by collaborating with the FSLN. Although the particular economic and political environment has changed, the potential for political action has not. Ultimately, the experience of liberation theology in Nicaragua should inspire a re-examination into the prevailing mode of thought that classifies religion as inherently conservative. Religion has revolutionary potential.

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