

The Preferential Option *of* the Poor: Liberation Theology, Pentecostalism, and the New Forms of Sacralization¹

Raúl E. Zegarra

The University of Chicago
rzegarra@uchicago.edu

Abstract

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

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

This paper argues that the alleged demise of liberation theology is an oversimplification of the movement's development. The perceived demise of liberation theology depends on a particular understanding of the process of secularization, one in which a teleological and institution-focused understanding of the fate of religion leads to the progressive disappearance of organized religion. Yet, a different interpretation of the process of secularization may allow us to see it as one that elicits new religious configurations and, therefore, one in which new forms of sacralization are possible. My contention is that liberation theology has remained active in civil society, especially through faith-based organizations not supported by the

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Catholic Church and through secular organizations. I argue that these organizations of civil society have become new sacred spaces to attend to the needs of the most vulnerable. To warrant these claims, I present a comparative study of the parallel development of liberation theology and Pentecostalism in Latin America, particularly in the case of Perú. Since both movements focus on the most disenfranchised and thus may compete for the same public, attention to the success or failure of their strategies will help to elucidate the current status of liberation theology vis-à-vis the allegation of its demise.²

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

Secularization: Social Process and Analytical Tool

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

² To my knowledge, this kind of comparative study has rarely been pursued, less so with reference to the theories of secularization. For a few recent exceptions, without reference to secularization, see Hartch (2014), Wingeier-Rayo (2011), Trejo (2009), and Zalpa and Offerdal (2008). For older studies, see Rolim (1980) and Mariz (1994).

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

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

Thus, I find little basis for the so-called “secularization thesis” (see Joas 2014, 9–21 for a thorough discussion). Secularization is inadequately construed as the progressive and almost inevitable path to the disappearance of religion due to the gains provided by the processes of modernization, democratization, and greater access to social goods. Even if the “secularization thesis” is presented with great nuance and important revisions (Norris and Inglehart 2011), it remains hardly defensible as a teleological and uniform process. For instance, the introduction of existential security (Norris and Inglehart 2011, 4-5) as a variable to predict the persistence or the lack of religiosity in a given country has proven problematic. It is indeed unclear that higher existential security translates into lower religious affiliation, and vice versa, with the United States still standing out as the permanent challenge to the theory. Moreover, the reliability of this approach is further complicated when we notice that the existential security variable has not been applied consistently across countries. Existential security stands for primary goods (food, water, etc.) when applied to lower-income countries

and for higher-order goods (predictability, risk prevention, etc.) when applied to higher-income countries (see Gorski and Altinordu 2008, 64–65).

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

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

Therefore, I suggest that we take a cautious approach to the study of the process of secularization, stressing what we know with relative certainty. First, the assertion that religion was destined to disappear has proven untenable. Not even in Europe we can sustain this claim without adding innumerable nuances that render this assertion almost meaningless. Second, even if we confine ourselves to Christianity, there is evidence that most religious individuals and communities have not taken the route of a radical privatization of their faith (Casanova 1994; 2008; Martin 2002). In the United States, in Latin America, and in some European countries, religious people are present in the public sphere both through the public presence of religious rituals and symbols, and by publicly advocating, often on religious grounds, for changes in legislation, policy, and so forth. Lastly, it is fair to say that even if we revise the notion that differentiation is the “valid core” of the theory of secularization, this dimension of the process still has force.

Even if the notion of a state-church seems to contradict the validity of differentiation, the closer we look the more we see that the contemporary version of state-churches is nothing

alike the confessional states of yore. Indeed, the Western nations that have a state-church model do not embrace it to the extent of creating a major challenge to the idea that religious institutions and the state have significantly different functions (Casanova 2008). Undeniably, there are other areas where the differentiation thesis shows its limits—the public funding of religious education or the judicial definition of what counts as valid religious exceptions, for instance (Sullivan 2005)—but it is still hard to deny that a serious process of differentiation has taken place. That is, in most formerly confessional Christian nations we have seen—to different degrees, for sure—a process in which the interests of the former or current state-churches—Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, etc.—become progressively differentiated from the interests of the state’s public policy. This is not to say, of course, that the interests of religious communities and the state cannot overlap. But if they do, it is not anymore due to the power of an established church. Rather, it happens through the election of state representatives who produce policy that reflects the religious interests of the populous.

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

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

In the Latin American case, the process of what I would like to call “differentiation-pluralization” has led to what Martin interprets as a major *religious* reconfiguration: from a Catholic monopoly to varying degrees of Catholic-Protestant shares of the religious arena

(2015a, 250).³ Now, what matters most for the purposes of this paper is to understand *how* this process of religious reconfiguration has taken place. Since I have established that the process of differentiation-pluralization is not uniform, I now shift to the specifics of the Latin American case. I argue that secularization understood as a process of differentiation-pluralization creates the conditions for religious reconfigurations and room for new experiences of sacralization (Joas 2013; 2016; 2021).

The Latin American Mixed Pattern: Differentiation-Pluralization

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

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

In contrast, the almost 400-year total monopoly of the Catholic Church in the Latin American colonies produced a very different pattern of secularization. When the Protestant challenge emerged in the 19th century—and much more clearly in the second half of the 20th century—it did so rather timidly, from the margins, and always as a minoritarian threat. Hence,

³ In this paper I will use “Protestant” to refer to the “mainline” or “historical” Protestant denominations (Lutherans, Calvinists, Episcopalians, Methodists, etc.), which were the first to arrive to Latin America. I will use “Evangelicals” to refer to revival groups that often separated from mainline Protestantism to form new congregations. In Latin America, most non-Catholic Christians are of Pentecostal influence. Hence, I use “Evangelical” and “Pentecostal” interchangeably, unless specific features of Pentecostalism are being discussed.

it never had the power to mobilize the masses toward radical confrontation. But more decisively, Protestantism became a challenge to the Catholic monopoly *centuries after* the vicious circles of violence witnessed in the European experience. Protestantism really flourished in Latin America when the basic structures of democratic living—even if weakly and always under threat of military coups—had already become part of the lived experience of most people in the region.

Therefore, the possibility of radical religious confrontation was precluded by the new social and political conditions. This led to the formation of a *Mixed Pattern* of secularization, where a considerably large (Protestant) minority peacefully coexists with a still dominant religious and cultural (Catholic) majority (Martin 2015b, 218).⁴ In this Mixed Pattern, secularization takes place as differentiation-pluralization, but without privatization and decline of religious faith.

From Mainline Protestantism to Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism

As noted, the beginning of the more serious incursions of Protestantism in Latin America starts in the 19th century. Such slow but steady presence correlates with the progressive erosion of the prerogatives of the Catholic Church, especially after the Wars of Independence. It is not a coincidence that during the time of warfare in Latin America, British assistance to the independentist parties was significant both ideologically and militarily. Partly, this was as a form to exact revenge on the Spaniards for helping the North American colonists to gain independence from Britain. But this was also a reflection of a more general clash between Iberian and Anglo civilizations and their own hegemonic agendas (Martin 1993, 9–11).

British assistance introduced ideas coming from the “Anglo” civilization, which were much welcomed by the independentist elites as a way to bring peace, democracy, and counter the alleged backwardness of centuries of Spanish rule. However, soon after the independentists’ victories, the axis of this geopolitical clash turned toward the United States. The hegemony of the United States was rapidly established first in the region—after military victories over Mexico and Spain—and then around the globe. By the end of the 19th century

⁴ Yet recent surveys suggest that in Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras, Catholics and Protestants may have reached a point of almost equal share of the religious market (Pew Research Center 2014).

the “Anglo” civilization started to be represented not by Britain, but by the United States—with an impressive range of influence.

The hegemonic vocation of the United States, its “Manifest Destiny,” was ironically justified by Latin American liberal politicians as a sign of progress. Therefore, many among the Latin American elites—especially in Mexico—welcomed US-American culture, and Protestantism with it, as a part of crusade for progress and democracy (Martin 1993, 93ff.; Hartch 2014, 22ff.).

But what were the values that these geopolitical changes introduced to Latin America? What kind of Protestant ethos was introduced to and developed in Latin America?

The Latin American Protestant Ethic

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

Contemporary Latin American Pentecostalism is the direct inheritor of movements of Protestant revival in the United States that called for people’s conversion, commonly known as Great Awakenings. In the 19th century, the most important denomination in the United States was Methodism. The revivals originating within Methodist quarters later became the most decisive influence in the expansion of Protestantism in Latin America (Robbins 2004, 119–20).

The first feature of Methodism worth noting is that, even in its British iteration, Methodism was a movement of *dissent* in which religion shifts away from the core structures of society—especially the political realm—towards the cultural realm (Martin 1993, 22). The main task of the Christian believer, therefore, is personal sanctification, which, in turn, leads to the sanctification of society. Methodists, together with other religious minorities in Britain, experienced firsthand the oppressive consequences of the alliance of the Church of England and the state. Therefore, Methodism’s second key feature, is the rejection of the corruption of

power and politics, focusing instead on *spiritual holiness* or *sanctification*. Thus, Methodists emphasized “the availability of grace to all, a millennial hope, and an intense search after ‘scriptural holiness’”(Martin 1993, 28).

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

Despite the “enthusiastic” origins of Methodism, the godly hysteria of the Holiness movement disturbed the Methodist establishment (Martin 1993, 28–29). Methodist leaders were particularly worried about blurring denominational boundaries. The break finally occurred in the early twentieth century during the famous Azusa Street Revival of 1906. It is here where most scholars find the birth of Pentecostalism as a distinct religious movement.

From this brief outline of what I call the “revival-dissent inheritance”, I draw three important conclusions. First, that the revivalism of Pentecostalism has an inherent potential for schism. Indeed, new *voluntary* associations, or “sects”, may form periodically, constituted by individuals who allege that they have experienced an awakening or *new birth* from the dormant faith of the originating group (see Troeltsch 1960, 2:993 for his typology of sects). Second, that this potential for schism is further kindled in the struggle to make churches truly local or indigenous. This is what happened with the US-American revivals of Methodism vis-à-vis the British Methodists. Similarly, this is what happened in Latin America in the 20th century, this time with locals gaining independence from the missionaries and churches from the United States (Martin 1993, 31ff). Third, that the formation of new groups overlaps with differences in social status. The revivals are the “fiery” spiritual reaction of marginalized groups to the “coldness” of the more established and educated classes. It should come as no surprise that Pentecostalism has mostly grown among the poor and people with little access to formal education—although this by no means implies that Pentecostalism is limited to people of low socio-economic status, as the growth of middle and upper-class Neo-

Pentecostal churches shows (Martin 1993, 30ff.; Ihrke-Buchroth 2016; Pérez Guadalupe 2019, 34–36, 45–51).

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

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

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

In this sense, the Pentecostal project is, ultimately, the full Christianization of society. When conditions are not favorable, though, Pentecostals restrict themselves to the creation of a “substitute society” (Martin 1993, 258) or an alternative “Christian citizenship.” (O’Neill 2010, 200ff) After all, sin always corrupts society, including the political realm. Therefore, the

“substitute society” approach may make more theological and strategic sense. But what if favorable conditions arise and the goal of Christianizing society seems more feasible? Political opportunity may lead to new theological responses.

In recent decades, and especially in the last few years, we see in the United States and in Latin America a tendency toward what we may call a model of “theocratic reconstructionism” or “religious conquest” (see Pérez Vela 2016 and Pérez Guadalupe 2019, respectively; Gorski and Perry 2022, for the case of the United States). That is, the use of the democratic system to accumulate political power in key positions of all branches of government to advance a Christian agenda. There are, of course, other forms of Evangelical presence in Latin America, which defend democracy and social justice on Christians grounds. For instance, the project of *misión integral*—an Evangelical variant of liberation theology—has advocated for decades for a Christian discipleship that integrates devotion and social, structural concerns (see Chao Romero 2020, 154–62). But these groups of progressive Evangelicals are a minority.

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

From Catholic Monopoly to Voluntary Disestablishment

The Latin American Wars of Independence, the slow emergence of proto-democratic states, and the subsequent development of different degrees of religious toleration changed the social location of the Catholic Church in the turn from the 19th to the 20th centuries. The almost absolute Catholic monopoly over all dimensions of culture started weakening, opening some doors to liberal ideas, many of which were coming through British and US-American influence, including those of Protestant Christianity discussed above.

However, this story will appear too one-sided if we do not consider the Catholic Church’s own agency and willingness to reconsider its role in Latin American society. The most influential ecclesial event in this regard was the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and

Pope John XXIII's invitation to the Church's *aggiornamento* or “updating.” For our purposes, the most important accomplishment of Vatican II was a radically new proposal about how the church should relate to the world, an approach that shifted from a long-standing defense of confessional Catholic states to the full embrace of democracy. Casanova has referred to this phenomenon as the “voluntary disestablishment” of the Catholic Church (Casanova 2018).

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

Further, the real growth of Evangelical Christianity in Latin America—in the form of Pentecostalism—only starts *after* the Catholic developments just noted. This growth correlates with the Latin American implementation of the values of Vatican II through the decisive Latin American Conference of Bishops of Medellín, Colombia (1968). Medellín, of course, was one of the milestones in the development and institutional implementation of liberation theology (Smith 1991). But it was also the expression of a major transformation of Latin American Catholicism in which the Catholic hierarchy, officially and decisively, shifted its pastoral and theological focus. The focus turned more than ever to civil society and left behind—for the most part—the attempt to regain the role of established religion. For these reasons, Casanova aptly notes that in the second half of the 20th century, Latin American Christianity went through a “double reformation” or a process of “parallel reformations.” That is, “the emergence and growth of a Pentecostal form of Reformed Protestant Christianity and the reformation of Catholic Christianity” (Casanova 2018, 88). In turn, these parallel reformations have led to the process of differentiation-pluralization I have described before.

The Latin American Catholic Ethic

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

In sharp contrast with all previous gatherings, the Medellín bishops denounced structural injustice, speaking directly about causes of poverty, economic systems of oppression, and the complicity of the church in the sustenance of these systems (see Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops 1990). The bishops also recognized the importance of and provided resources for the growth of the basic ecclesial communities, a significant turn and move toward the empowerment of the laity. Central in the development of these communities was the method of “consciousness raising” that theologians and catechists used to organize and mobilize the poor while reading the Bible and reflecting on reality (Smith 1991, 130–32).

In sum, Medellín envisioned a church in which Christians will commit to the struggle for social transformation, a struggle to bring justice to all, but especially to the poor. Later, in the Bishops’ Conference of Puebla, México (1979), the bishops defined this new vision as the “preferential option for the poor”, which became the motto of liberation theology (Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops 1990, 254–58).

Of course, nothing said here should suggest that liberation theology and its preferential option for the poor became the dominant current of Catholicism in the region. It is well documented that quickly after Medellín, backlash started (Smith 1991, 125–233). For some of its critics, liberation theology was an unredeemable Marxist politicization of the Christian faith that had to be eliminated for the sake of religious orthodoxy. For other critics, liberation theology was not a threat to the Christian faith *per se*, but to their power and prerogatives as members of the ecclesial and social elites, accustomed to rule without challenge. Thus, liberation theologians became an uncomfortable presence that—for some—had to be eradicated.

Thus, despite some important victories for the liberationist wing, Puebla was a less radical conference than Medellín. And by the following conference, held in Santo Domingo in 1992, a solid resistance against liberation theology had consolidated among the bishops and

the clergy. However, as we will see shortly, the ecclesial vision of liberation theology did significantly permeate Latin American Catholicism. But, after the backlash, it did so—for the most part—outside the official ecclesial channels and structures. Interestingly, though, we could say that this was, precisely, the natural development of the voluntary disestablishment discussed above.

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

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

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

We may think about these groups as more informal networks—“networks of agape,” perhaps (Taylor 2007, 282; Joas 2014, 132–33)—that are deeply Catholic in their convictions and their theology, yet they depart on certain matters from established Catholic teachings, structures, and responses to current problems. These Catholics do so, precisely, because they believe that some of those teachings and responses to current problems collide with fundamental Catholic values, values like that of *agape*. *Agape*, that special kind of love

supposedly advanced by Christians of all kinds, is expected to be characterized by respect, kindness, benevolence, and solidarity toward the neighbor. But many, especially women, queer, and poor people, do not find in the Catholic Church—neither in many other churches, for that matter—the affirmation and support they need. Many of them have been turning away from the established Catholic Church, but not from their Catholicism (see Starks 2013 for in-depth-interviews that elaborate on the predicament of progressive/liberal Catholics).

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

Alternative Models of Socio-Political Change: Catholic-Evangelical Dynamics at the Turn of the Century

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

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

But there are some additional issues that help to understand the growth of Evangelical Christianity and the apparent decline of the communities associated with liberation theology. The initial success of liberation theology greatly depended on the combination of political opportunity, organizational strength, and the emergence of an insurgent consciousness among many Latin Americans in the 60s and 70s. Without necessarily representing the majority of the

faithful or the clergy, the bishops and theologians present at Medellín were capable of persuading the majority of their colleagues that a social-justice oriented pastoral program was the right response to the challenges of their day. Seizing this opportunity and using the organizational strength of the Catholic Church, they were able to institutionalize liberation theology, first, through the documents of Medellín and, second and more importantly, through several organizations that warranted the sustainability and growth of the Medellín charter.

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

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

From Political Violence and Scarcity to Basic Democracy and Prosperity

The emergence and development of liberation theology overlaps with the beginning of different forms of political upheaval in Latin America. Most notably, it overlaps with the appearance of several right-wing dictatorships that, starting with Brazil in 1964, took over the

majority of the region. In this sense, the consciousness raising that was crucial in the methodology of liberation theology rapidly developed in a form of resistance not only against economically and politically unjust systems, but also against flagrantly violent governments. Therefore, the infrastructure that started expanding after Medellín became the basis for movements of resistance and the defense of human rights. The situation became so extreme in some cases that even bishops—most notably Enrique Angelelli (1976), and Oscar Romero (1980), and Juan Gerardi (1998)—were killed in an astonishing sign of the radical break of the old alliances between church and state.

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

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

In turn, this pendulum moving from political violence and economic scarcity to basic democratic peace and relative prosperity appears to have favored Pentecostalism. The Pentecostal version of the Protestant Ethic seems to be more fitting than the liberationist approach for times of relative progress, particularly in its Neo-Pentecostal version where the emphasis on “health and wealth” is greater than before (Hartch 2014, 102). It is not surprising then, that the discourse of entrepreneurship is now so well spread in Latin America and that in many places the entrepreneurial spirit overlaps with the growth of Pentecostalism. Some among the poor are less concerned with structural issues and more interested in gaining

economic prosperity and social status, usually through the development of small businesses and intra-faith social cooperation. Yet liberation theology followers were not unaffected by this interest in economic prosperity.

Indeed, in the conditions of political violence in Latin America prior to the 1990s, many people decided to risk their lives struggling for their basic rights. However, when certain sense of peace and economic progress arrived to the region, the sense of urgency diminished. Further, the political scene changed as well. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the traditional political parties in the region, and particularly in Perú, started to lose credibility, unions weakened, and militant collective action withdrew significantly. Thus, the project of big social change driven by collective struggle and protest became harder to pursue, but also felt less capable of achieving change in the new socio-political conditions (Brooks 1999). For many, the struggles of daily survival were already sufficiently dramatic. A grand scale social project appeared beyond reach (Martin 1993, 118; O'Neill 2010, 76ff.).

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

As Brooks' study shows, "this may even include engagement in technical training, forging alliances with multinational corporations, or sponsoring entrepreneurship as means of advancing Catholic doctrine" (1999, 72-73). Indeed, the social, political, and economic transformations of the last three decades created many obstacles for the grassroots organizing of the 1960s and 1970s, but these transformations also generated new opportunities. Now the focus has turned toward organizations fostering human development through concrete projects to enhance agriculture, create sources of clean water, foster democratic citizenship, and so on (Brooks 1999; Chamberlain 2019c; 2019a).

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

Opposing Views of the Political Process

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

The Evangelical approach to the political, for the most part, is radically different. Even though the very condition for the growth of Pentecostalism in the region was the process of differentiation-pluralization, the goal of most vocal Evangelical political leaders seems to be reverting this process as much as possible to limit plurality and make society more uniformly Christian. Thus, a takeover of government through the electoral process is in the agenda of many Evangelical political leaders in the region—even if their success is quite limited in most cases, with very few presidential victories and significant underrepresentation in congress (Pérez Guadalupe 2019, 59–130).

The Brazilian experience is so far the most obvious example of the theocratic reconstructionist model, but all over Latin America we witness some milder forms of the same ideals. Yet, even Brazilian Evangelical voters appear to be reconsidering their choices in the current 2022 Presidential Election. At the time of writing, former President Lula da Silva has had a consistent advantage (10%, on average) over the incumbent, President Bolsonaro, for several months and seems poised to win this year's presidential election (Harrison 2022). Most important: Evangelicals—70% of which supported Bolsonaro in 2018—appear to have withdrawn their support for Bolsonaro in large numbers, with polls showing his Evangelical support only a bit over 40% (Campos Lima 2022; The Economist 2022). In other countries, Evangelicals neither have reached control of government nor have they pursued radical reconstructionist agendas like in the Brazilian case. It is still too early to say, but one may argue that the lack of success of the reconstructionist model is because it is perceived as too radical. Plus, earlier attempts of “religious conquest” through confessional Evangelical parties failed miserably everywhere in the region in prior decades (Pérez Guadalupe 2019, 60ff). A return to some form of religious establishment appears to be too extreme for most people in Latin America, even if good portions of the population lean conservative.

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

Further, the expansion of Evangelical Christianity was not able to erase the mark that the voluntary disestablishment of the Catholic Church left in Latin America. We could hypothesize that Evangelicals are most successful when they work within the ecumenical arrangement created by this voluntary disestablishment, focusing on civil society, and participating in politics without reconstructionist goals. Evangelicals experience political

backlash when they appear too hostile to Catholicism or when they support candidates that pursue some form of theocratic reconstructionism.

Of course, the irony is not lost. For, as we have seen, the forerunners of Evangelical Christianity in Latin America were dissenters who escaped the persecution of the Church of England. The memory of persecution pushed them to create a new political order in the North American colonies in which non-establishment was central. Yet the creation of a “free space,” so significant to the Christian dissenters of yore (Martin 1993, 268), required some important political compromises in the less pluralistic Latin American scene. Which, in turn, may occasionally lead to the temptation of seizing political power to expand that free space, as we have seen in the past in places like Chile and Guatemala (Martin 1993, 253–55; Hartch 2014, 60–61, 82–87) and we currently see in the Brazilian case. But we should also note that the Brazilian experience seems exceptional and in possible retreat. In the region, it is much more common to see Evangelical elected officials and “political Evangelicals” on the ground attempting to advance a “moral agenda” but within the limits of the democratic system, even if reluctantly (Pérez Guadalupe 2019, 53–68).

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

After these observations, one should rightly ask if Christian believers have other available options to approach the political realm beyond protest and struggle and reconstructionist agendas. We now return to liberation theology and discuss its present situation. Did the followers of liberation theology abandon the old struggle for social justice? Did liberation theology die?

The answer to these questions cannot be conclusive. We simply do not have enough studies that directly focus on liberation theology in Latin America after its most successful years and the beginning of the backlash (Romero 2009; 2012; Brooks 1999, are notable exceptions). Yet, some answers can be provisionally provided drawing from the data we do have about the Peruvian experience.

First and foremost, I believe we should partially reject the framing of the question in terms of winners and losers. Even though competition is real and supply-demand theories do offer some insights (e.g. Trejo 2009), approaching the relationship of liberation theology

toward Evangelical Christianity in this way overlooks key theological convictions shaping the Catholic response.

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

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

I believe that this transformation is the key to understand what may have happened to a good portion of the followers of liberation theology when the process of disarticulation of most of its church-based networks started in the late 70s. Put simply: many followers of liberation theology migrated to faith-based organizations not supported by the Catholic Church and to secular organizations of civil society *in order to* continue their faith-based struggle for social justice.

For instance, in the Peruvian case several institutions and organizations were created during the time of political violence between the terrorist organization Sendero Luminoso and the Peruvian state (1980s-1990s). These are just a few: the Association for the Families of Victims of Terrorism (AFAVIT), the Association Pro-Human Rights (APRODEH), the Legal

Defense Institute, (IDL), the Vicariates of Solidarity, and the Pastoral Office of Human Dignity (CPDH).⁵

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

My point is that this work on human rights and human development was done through what we may call *para-ecclesial structures*. And this was the case not precisely because the faithful wanted to leave the Catholic Church, but because the Catholic Church gave them limited opportunities to express their commitments to social justice. That is, by dismantling the multiple organizations that allowed liberation theology to grow in the 70s, the church hierarchy created a vacuum. Catholics *as Catholics* were committed to the project of liberation, but did not find room for that commitment in the institutional church. They were slandered as

⁵ I keep the acronyms in Spanish to facilitate the recognition of these organizations, since they are known through their acronyms. The CPDH started is the only one that started as a church-sponsored organization, but promptly acquired autonomous status.

Marxists, as divisive, and ultimately left on their own. There were important exceptions among the bishops, clergy, and religious, for sure, but the church environment was overall hostile.

The solution that many of these Catholics found to this conundrum was to keep the struggle through different means. Initially and decisively, the work was done through organizations for human rights advocacy. But later on, when relative peace and economic prosperity started to emerge in the mid-90s, many of the followers of liberation theology kept the work of empowerment of the poor and defense of people's rights through human development projects. They worked in nonprofits, academic institutes, universities, and government. They saw these spaces as new sacred spaces in which their Catholic commitments could be genuinely and freely expressed. This did not replace church attendance, faith-based communities, and the like. But it did become a form to replace the liberationist work that was previously done with the institutional support of the church. Plus, at least in Perú, there were not too many alternatives: explicitly anti-liberationist bishops controlled most dioceses *until very recently*.

This takes me to the 2010s and the present moment. The late 2000s started to hint toward a new ecclesial situation in Latin America. The first public sign of this was the Bishops Conference of Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007. There the bishops and Pope Benedict XVI embraced the preferential option for the poor and praised the work of the basic ecclesial communities, both directly associated with the history of liberation theology (Gutiérrez 2018). Further, the 2013 election of Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio of Argentina, a key player in Aparecida, as the successor of Pope Benedict created a much friendlier context for liberation theology.

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

Müller and Gutiérrez 2014). Similarly, in 2019 Pope Francis restored the priestly faculties of Fr. Ernesto Cardenal, a prominent supporter of the early days of the Sandinista movement. In 2018, Francis made Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador—killed for his defense of the poor and one of the heroes of liberation theology—an official saint of the Catholic Church. Lastly, in January 2022, Fr. Rutilio Grande SJ—a Salvadoran priest killed for his defense of the poor and central in Oscar Romero’s own vocation—was beatified by the Catholic Church.

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

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

Perhaps this is simply a confirmation that the development of para-ecclesial structures described above, even though contingent on the specific conditions of its time, is here to stay. This is a matter that requires more careful consideration, and empirical verification. But growing rates of disaffiliation, especially among the Catholic youth, seem to be related not to a rejection of faith itself, but to a rejection of a faith that does not seem to speak credibly to the younger generation (see Starks 2013; MacGregor and Haycock 2021). Yet if this is indeed a rejection not of religion but of “bad” religion (Orsi 2007, 187–88), this points to a possible relocation of the religious impetus. My hypothesis is that, as it happened with liberation theology, this religious impetus keeps migrating to faith-based organizations not supported by the Catholic Church and to secular organizations *in which* many Catholic believers find the most adequate spaces for the expression of their faith.

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

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

But I am taking an additional step. My point is that the process of disestablishment of the Catholic Church may have led to a second kind of disestablishment. In this second kind, more and more, new processes of sacralization are taking place *outside* the conventional parameters of sacred institutions, like the Catholic Church. New experiences of self-transcendence may be elicited. Such experiences take ourselves out of the realm of the ordinary by confronting us with what is beyond our boundaries, often leaving some kind of mark and eliciting affective attachment (Joas 2008, 7–10). Such experiences seem to be emerging among many Catholics in response to the dehumanization produced by racism, misogyny, homophobia, and the like, energizing people to act. And through that new motivation, “people who feel bound to a tradition find new ways to articulate it by engaging with social change or

the representatives of other traditions”(Joas 2013, 131) These new forms of articulation are creating new networks and communities in which many liberationist or progressive Catholics find “free spaces” to express their Catholic commitments, spaces rarely available in the institutional church (see Heft 2021; Rabbia et al. 2019 for some examples). Will this shape the Catholicism of the future? Will these new forms of sacralization—as has always happened—push the Catholic Church in a new direction? Only time will tell.

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