

# Theology, Liberation and Peace: A Reflection

Michel Andraos

Liberation theologies are reflections on lived practices of Christians in situations of violence as they resist structural injustices and build alternatives for living in peace and for transforming these situations. Such theological reflections in light of the gospel and Christian traditions inspire and empower people of faith to imagine and strive for life in freedom, justice and dignity in the midst of violence. A life in peace and dignity is God's will for all people. The gospel calls Christians to believe in and witness to a life of peace and justice. Working for liberation and peace from a faith perspective is acting with God's Spirit moving in history and in the life of the all creation. Liberation theologies are understood primarily as theologies of peace at the personal and social levels. Believers in Jesus are called to respond individually and collectively to the challenges of life and the societies in which they live, especially in situations of structural injustice (e.g. poverty, war, oppression, corruption, fundamentalism). Liberation theologies are not abstract beliefs systems or ideological commitments; they are reflections on Christian living and practice in concrete situations of violence, and are intimately connected to the vocation of being Christian in particular contexts. Liberation theologies as reflections do not change social realities of injustice; the practice of believers inspired by such theologies does. This theology, liberation theologians affirm, is a second, not a first act.

Liberation theologies are contextual and deeply biblical. They are reflections rooted in the biblical narratives and experiences of the God of Jesus, as God of history, liberator of the oppressed who takes side with those working for justice. Such a theology is primarily inspired by the experience of Jesus Christ as liberator who, called by God - whom he intimately called his father - and moved by God's Spirit,

resisted the evil and violent social, political and religious structures of his time, and paid his life as a price for this resistance. His faith in God moved him to build a movement of resistance to the evil structures, not only in the spiritual sense, but also in a social and political sense. He announced a new worldview, the reign of God instead of the reign of Rome, and he inspired, called, and organized people to live in new alternative communities of faith. Unlikely he would have been killed by the Romans if his resistance were only spiritual.

There is not a country where the Arabic speaking Christian communities are located that is living in peace. Our peoples have been experiencing wars and multiple forms of structural violence for a very long time (See in particular the articles by Christo El Morr and Mitri Raheb) Many peoples in our regions are experiencing occupation, oppression, powerlessness, corruption at all levels, are crushed by poverty and unjust economic systems they did not create, and are victims of systemic injustices, social and physical violence and war. The majority of our people are disenchanted with their state powers, governments, political systems, parties, international organizations, religious and clerical structures, etc. They experience a failure of the social and political systems that are supposed to work for them and support them to have a better life. Instead, these systems, for the most part, are working against the people. Structural violence is pervasive and cynicism towards the political, social and religious systems is a common experience.

Christians, individually and as communities, have historically responded in multiple ways from a faith perspective to structural violence, following the example of Jesus. We can find examples across history of theological reflections from liberation perspectives that critiqued and resisted violent social structures.

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In the early centuries of Christianity in the east, bishops and theologians such as John Chrysostom and Basil of Caesarea are two well-known examples among many. In our time, one of the most common and well know expressions of liberation theologies come from the Latin American church. In the Roman Catholic world, the tradition I know best, liberation theologies emerged in the 1960s and became more clearly defined shortly after the Second Vatican Council (1965-1962). They emerged primarily in Latin America in situations of oppressive poverty, political dictatorships and corruption, unjust economic structures, and military violence. One of the main contributions of these theologies is the articulation of the option for the poor and oppressed and solidarity with their struggle for justice and dignity, as a preferential option central to Christian faith and practice. Inspired by the call of the Council and other political and social movements of the time, many Christian communities became engaged in the struggles of the world against structural poverty, for ending colonization and dependency, and in solidarity with peoples aspiring for self-determination, following the movement of the Spirit in history. In theological terms, these movements were «reading the signs of the times.» They believed that the work of the Spirit in history was manifested in the struggles of the poor and oppressed for justice and freedom. Christian communities from around the world took this call seriously. A relatively new articulation of theological thinking emerged in the 1970s that was based on a rereading of the Scriptures and a reinterpretation of Christian revelation from the perspective of the poor and oppressed, through their eyes, life experiences, and struggles. This new theological articulation was understood by many as a corrective to a long modern Christian practice that focused mostly on right doctrines and beliefs rather than practice and witness to justice. Instead

of theology being primarily a reflection on ways for interpreting or rather repeating and maintain the past, the new theological movement paid more attention to the present and how the Spirit is acting among Christians in the world today as they struggled for justice and peace, witnessing concretely to the call of the gospel and following Jesus. A rereading of the history of salvation through the experience of the poor and oppressed revealed God's action on the side of the poor and the presence of the Spirit in their movements of struggle for justice against violence and oppression.

These new theological movements were debated very seriously at the Latin American Bishops Conference meetings since the late 1960s. (Medellin, Colombia, 1968; Puebla, Mexico, 1979; Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, 1992; and Aparecida, Brazil, 2007) While there was opposition, at times very serious, from certain bishops and the Vatican, the official teaching of the Latin American Catholic Church affirmed these theological perspectives and movements and their importance for Christian faith and practice in the world today and for the future of peace, particularly in the situation of pervasive poverty and oppression in which many people in Latin American countries live. The most recent Synod for Amazonia, which is taking place in the Vatican as we publish our magazine this month of October 2019, continues in the same spirit. The working documents of the synod call for a radical commitment of the church to the Indigenous, poor and excluded peoples of the Amazon regions and to support their struggles. The documents also call on the universal church to make an option for them, for the protection of Mother Earth, for an integral ecology, and for the conversion of the church. The synod's preparatory documents are profoundly inspired by the same liberation theological movements

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that emerged few decades earlier in the same continent and region, and that at times the same church hierarchy tried to silence. The starting point of this synod is not a theological reflection on how to apply the right Christian doctrine and catechesis in the Amazon region among Indigenous peoples, and how to convert those who are still not Christian. The focus is rather on how the church is going to listen deeply to the cry of the Indigenous peoples of the region; how the church is going to repent for being part of the colonization of the region for more the four centuries; how the church is part of the structures of violence today; and what it means to witness to the good news of the gospel today in the region. The goal of the synod is to search for new ways to be a church today, a church called to be for others as its reason of being, not a church mostly interested in its own continuity and in protecting its interests. This, I believe, is a call to churches almost everywhere, including the Arabic speaking Christian communities.

These new theological movements that began in the 1960s were not only limited to Latin America. Similar experiences were simultaneously evolving in many churches around the world and have converged to become an international ecumenical movement. The World Council of Churches supported and became home for many of these movements. One of the most representative expressions of this global theological movement in the emergence of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), which started after a meeting of theologians from many Third World countries in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in 1976. In the Arab world, just to use another example of a movement in the same spirit, an ecumenical meeting of several hundred theologians from more than 35 countries took place in Beirut in May 1970. The final report of the meeting, known as the Beirut Appeal, sent a message to the universal church and the world calling for solidarity with the struggle

of the Palestinian people for the liberation of Palestine, emphasizing the importance of this struggle for peace in the region and the world.

Another example of a movement moved by the same Spirit, also from the 1970s and from Beirut, is the social movement spearheaded by Greek Catholic Bishop Gregoire Haddad (d. 2015) and its voice Afaq magazine. This social movement inspired liberationist theological thinking and was ecumenical and interreligious. It called for solidarity with the poor in their struggle for justice, and for social and ecclesial reforms. Bishop Haddad was labeled the «Red Bishop» by those who disagreed with or felt threatened by the reforms the movement proposed. The hierarchy of the Catholic Church, locally and with support from the Vatican, forced him to resign in 1975. Similar attacks on Christian leaders who were active in similar movements happened around the world. Thousands of Christian activists and church leaders paid their life for their peaceful resistance to structures of violence.

The most prominent example is Archbishop Romero of San Salvador, assassinated in 1980 along with hundreds of other religious leaders, lay and ordained. It is only recently the Bishop Romero was acknowledged as martyr of the faith by the Vatican under pope Francis and was declared saint in 2018, which is an acknowledgement of his right theological path and liberationist pastoral practice. The worldwide attack on Christian liberation movements and leaders in the churches by conservative church hierarchies and right-wing military governments and dictators in the 1980s and 1990s weakened these movements and undermined the capacity of the churches to engage in social transformation and building peace. However, these movements of the Spirit are not easily silenced, and they continue to re-emerge in different countries under new forms and names. In the current multiple global crises,

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many churches are revaluing these liberation pastoral and theological experiences of the past decades.

Many things could be learned from the Latin American experience, however, it is not a recipe for doing liberation theology in other parts of the world. While there are similarities in the structural violence our peoples are living with the Latin American experience, there are also some significant differences. We also live in a different world today. The Christian communities are minorities in our regions and in most places they have little social influence. In addition, the question of liberation has become much more complex than in the 1970s and 1980s. Another important and major difference is that the Arabic speaking Christian communities in the region live among Muslim majorities. Any new reflection on theology, faith and liberation has to be necessarily interreligious. This opens new possibilities that still need to be explored. The need for liberation and peace concern all believers from all religious communities and traditions, as well as non-believers, and the necessity of social change is a conviction shared by all peoples from all religions. Exploring such an interreligious theology of liberation requires a separate reflection, however, this is an urgent theological task for the future in our region.

As I conclude this reflection, I would like to highlight the theological works of Palestinian Christians and their theology on the struggle of their people for liberation, justice, peace and reconciliation under occupation. One could trace a sustained school of original, indigenous articulations of a Palestinian theology of liberation since the late 1980s. After the groundbreaking work of Naim Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Liberation Theology*, several other theologians, in conversation with each other and with an international network of theologians and church leaders in solidarity

with the struggle of their people, developed serious works in all areas of theology, biblical, systematic, pastoral, that were inspired by and in dialogue with the struggles of their people and other liberation theologies outside Palestine. Mitri Raheb, member of the editorial board of this magazine, is among the leading theologians in this movement. The recent Palestinian theological works in the areas of peace and reconciliation, such as *The Kairos Document*, articulate deeply inspirational theologies that are of importance for the whole region and the universal church. There is nothing remotely comparable in any other country or local churches in our region. In terms of publications in Arabic, as far as I know, there is very little original literature on liberation theologies, which is a challenge for promoting this way of thinking among our communities.

Liberation theology cannot be imported; it has to grow organically. With the exception of Palestine, liberation theology movements did not establish deep roots among Arabic speaking theologians in the Middle East and North Africa. Palestinian liberation theology is more known internationally than among the Christian communities in the region, including theology students. In the 1990s a series of Arabic translations and some original summary writings by the Jesuit priest William Seedhom was published as part of the *Dar Al-Mashrik* series *Theological Studies*. These books include several key topics on liberation theologies from around the world (Asian, African and Latin American).

However, the articulation of local and regional theological reflections on our peoples' struggles for liberation and peace is still missing. During my years of theological studies in Lebanon in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the topic of liberation theology was totally absent from the curriculum. Liberation theology was a well-kept secret. And when I

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came back more than 20 years later during a sabbatical semester to teach at my old school, liberation theologies were vaguely known to the students. The works of Palestinian theologians, already well known at the schools of theology in North America where I was living, were virtually unknown among the students and professors I interacted with. Reflecting back on these years now from the diaspora, my first critique from a liberation theology perspective is that our theological curriculum was very Eurocentric and colonial. There were hardly any original theology textbooks in Arabic written by local theologians and that are specific to the context of the Arabic speaking Christian communities.

Theology was taught mostly in French by Lebanese professors to students who for the most part were seminarians from different countries of the Middle East. What an irony. Local Arabic speaking professors using a

foreign language for teaching and intellectually forming local students to serve their local Arabic speaking churches, and for the most part neither the professors nor the students spoke that foreign language very well. Reflecting back on that educational experience, I could see how the colonization of mind and being was so deep in our theological educational systems, and how these systems perpetuate coloniality. I am not sure if the colonial educational situation has changed much since. During my brief teaching experience in 2008, I did not notice any significant change. However, I am speaking here from a very limited personal experience and do not want to generalize. Other schools from other denominations might have different experiences.