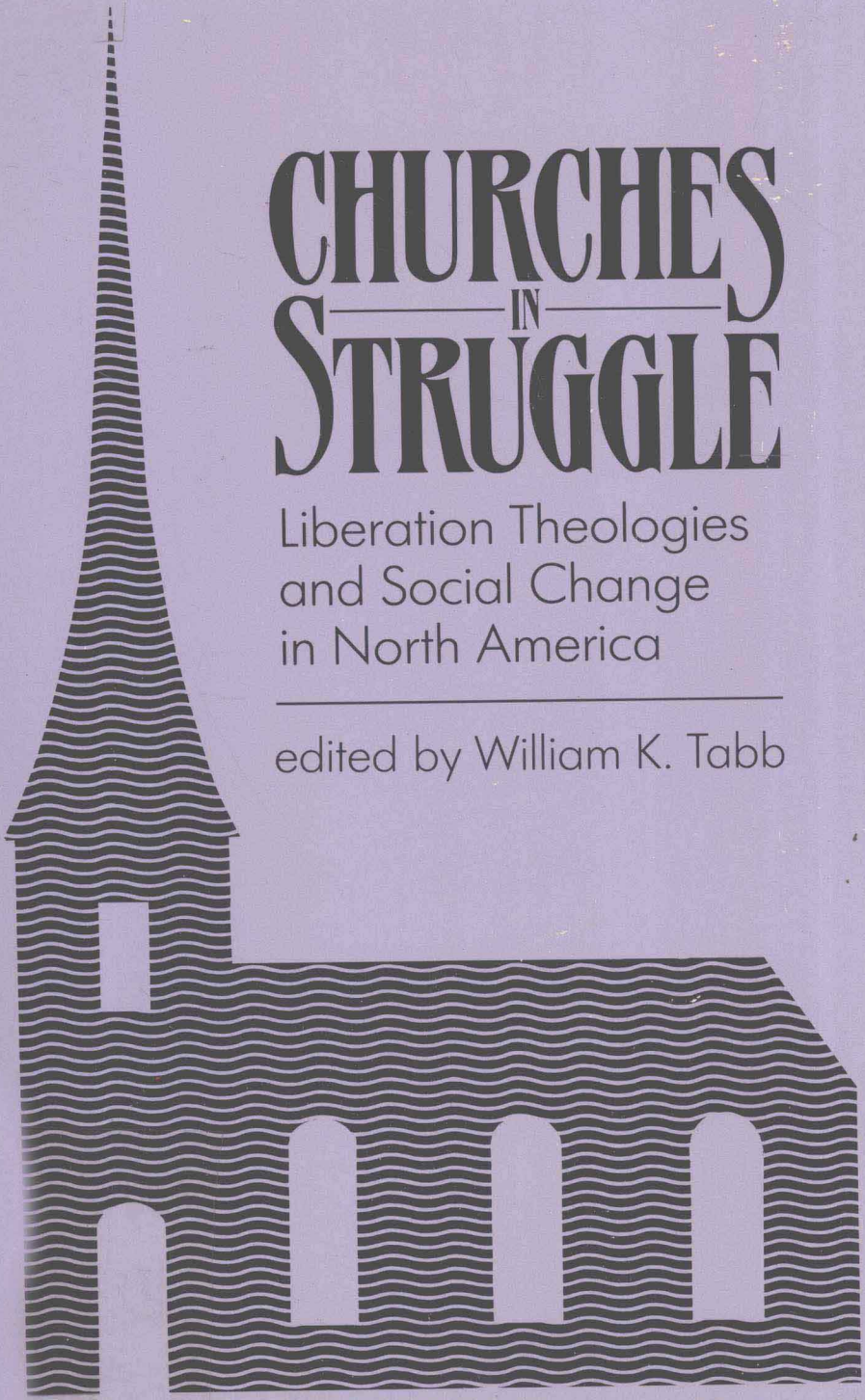
CHURCHES IN STRUGGLE

Liberation Theologies and Social Change in North America

edited by William K. Tabb



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Introduction: Transformative Theologies and the Commandment to Do Justice

William K. Tabb

In the spring of 1984, Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff, the editors of *Monthly Review,* were urged by Bobbye Ortiz to do a special summer issue on "Religion and the Left." Over lunch one day, as I was suggesting people who might be asked to write essays, Harry asked me how I knew about this subject and why I had not told him before about this thing called Liberation Theology. Without rehearsing my many attempts on previous occasions to explain to Marxists that there are huge numbers of committed Christians who in their practice challenge injustice, it is perhaps useful to say something about my own involvement. It is only because of a unique and perhaps accidental set of circumstances that I was privileged to be a participant in events that were not accessible to other nonchurch socialists.

In 1973, after the coup in Chile that overthrew Salvador Allende, Father Sergio Torres, a Chilean priest active in the Liberation Theology movement, came to the United States and decided to facilitate the process of introducing Liberation Theology to North Americans by building an interracial, interreligious community of progressive church people in the United States, similar in inspiration to those that have developed in Latin America. I am an economist and happened to be in the office of the Union for Radical Political Economics when Father Torres called for help. I soon found myself at the headquarters of the Maryknoll Fathers, a Catholic order involved in missionary work, acting as an economics consultant at a planning session out of which came an exciting project called Theology in the Americas. TIA is unique in its effort

to bring together all those who work in communities of struggle for social justice and to build a unity that both respects diversity of group identity and reflects faith commitment in actions in the world.

I have been back to Maryknoll many times since then, and have been significantly influenced by individual Maryknoll sisters and fathers, lay missionaries, and the people at the Maryknoll publishing house, Orbis Books. The commitment to doing justice in the spirit of love and humility, rarely seen in secular circles, draws me back to be refreshed and strengthened again and again.

The essays in this book, while written by individuals, are in a real sense the reflection of the creativity of social movements and religious groups that are committed to the struggle for economic and social justice and see the biblical message as a profoundly radical one: that God is active in history, siding with the oppressed in their struggle for liberation. The theology of such groups is shaped by their praxis. Responding to their God's desire that they do justice, they act and reflect on their actions in the light of their reading of the Bible. In the United States, many of those inspired by such an understanding of their religion have been influenced by third world theologies—in particular, but not solely, by the movement known as Liberation Theology that has developed in Latin America. Because Liberation Theology is historically specific to Latin America, I would have preferred to adopt an entirely different term—transformative theologies—to describe those new theologies that are developing both in the third world and in the United States, and that are described and discussed in this book. But the term "liberation theology" has become so accepted that it seems unnecessary to create linguistic confusion by insisting on a new term. Thus in this book the plural, liberation theologies, will be used to encompass all those theologies that have in common a commitment to do justice and transform social reality as a fulfillment of the biblical message.

All the "new" theological interpretations are seeking to revitalize the Christian religion by going back to the Bible, re-reading it through the eyes of the poor and oppressed, the people to whom Jesus first preached his good news. In one way, then, they are not new at all. But they seem so, because the biblical message has long been a captive of the principalities and powers of the world, which have sought to domesticate those radical impulses that are at the center of all religions at their birth. New religions—from Judaism to Christianity to the many other religions of the world—are created when an articulation of what is wrong with the current order

coincides with a statement of an alternative vision so powerful that it compels large numbers of people to accept its truth. Yet over time this all-encompassing coherence becomes lost, as institution-building takes precedence over belief and the new church gains a vested interest in the material trappings of power and influence. The descendants of those who were touched by the spirit of the original power of the faith only know the ritual; they have moved far from the central beliefs of the original commitment. The Old Testament tells this story in terms of Israel, which, forsaking its convenant with God, becomes an imperialist power, its kings then called to task by the prophets. In a sense, then, what Christians today call Liberation Theology is not really a new idea for those Jews who claim a continous heritage of—in the words of the prophet Micah—knowing God by doing justice. Indeed, once the battle for acceptance of the legitimacy of Liberation Theology is over, continuity will develop as an important moment in this theological process.

But the essays in this book deal less with the continuities of the Judeo-Christian tradition and more with the task of reconnecting with these earlier understandings in a different historical context, a context of suffering and oppression in the third world. Out of this situation has come a new way of doing theology, from the vantage point of the poor, the sufferers. In each nation, each area, a new theology has arisen, one that melds the different experiences of national culture, regional church, and denominational community into a unique theological reflection. And the good news has traveled from the exploited outer regions of the third world to the exploiting metropolitan centers in that center of the first world, the United States, until the affluent churches of suburban North America echo with feelings, words, and concerns of those who will no longer collaborate in the oppression of their brothers and sisters, either in their own country or abroad.

The rejection of possessive individualism, of national chauvinism, and of the implicit racism that characterizes the American notion of patriotism is both a return to the ethical beliefs of an earlier Christianity and a challenge to the secular religion of America, which celebrates getting rich and being important as reflections of God's favor. For the theologies of liberation, the central message of the Bible is that to know God is to do justice, and that women, men, and nations are to be judged by how they treat the most vulnerable members of the human family, rather than by the rituals they observe or their private experiences of conversion, which leave the individual's social role unchanged.

Yet in the United States today it is commonly believed that religion is a personal matter, and that conversion involves the acceptance of Christ as a personal savior. Such an individualistic religious stance is often wed to a conservative political outlook in which the United States stands for the good, while the Soviet Union stands for the evil empire, the devil incarnate, and in which freedom is to be ensured by military virility and wise all-knowing authority figures, who—like God himself—are powerful, white, and male. We see ourselves as God's chosen people, in our virture fit to lead the "Free World," which is composed of lesser peoples infected by socialism, full of poorer nations that can accomplish much if they would only follow our lead.

Although this picture of the religious community in the United States is extreme, even liberal Protestantism is, in some of its versions, a more sophisticated celebration of America's chosenness, with a similar implicit acceptance of our elect status as the leader of other nations. Versions of liberal Protestantism that are more imbued with social gospel thinking do challenge such elitist notions of the rightness of the class, race, and gender hierarchies that exist today, but until very recently they have had privileged access to the nation's decision-makers and have accepted the position of advisors to the powerful, rather than a role as their adversaries. Thus religion, for most Americans, has offered comfort, not a challenge, to our world view and way of life.

This book was planned with the goal of introducing the religious left to the secular left, and one of its aims is to overcome the suspicion and even hostility that exists between two groups of people who should be allies and who have much to learn from each other. Just as Christians who are new to a serious consideration of the possible relevance of socialism can be confused by the fifty-seven varieties of Marxist, Marxist-Leninist, socialist humanist, Trotskyist, Maoist, and other labels competing for attention, so secular leftists confronting their need to rethink the possible progressive content of religious movements and church dogma face a bewildering array of viewpoints and practice.

To many secular leftists, even the stances taken by the progressive churches are full of contradictions. Thus progressive churches seem more aware of the suffering of black South Africans than of the role the United States plays in aiding South Africa's destabilization of Angola, more sympathetic in their understanding of the feminization of poverty than willing to come to terms with the class basis of that poverty. To secular leftists, then, the antipathy to the concept of class struggle, the emphasis on reconciliation, the

belief in the possibility of convincing the powerful to change their ways and become more sensitive to the needs of the poor disqualifies even the progressive church from serious consideration as a source of transformation.

Yet perhaps this view is the result of misunderstanding—or partial understanding. For it can be argued that the strands of the emerging theologies of liberation that are represented in this book show a religious understanding that does have a revolutionary potential, one that is having a ripple effect in the progressive mainstream churches in North America. This is an exceedingly important development, and secular leftists need not embrace "religion," or uncritically accept that all progressive church people share with them a common understanding of either social reality or analytic method, to recognize that there are common interests and overlapping values. The hostility to religion that exists on the left will continue as long as the appeal of religion seems to be based on superstition, otherworldliness, a blind faith in authority and dogma, and a willingness to attribute to the supernatural that which is the creation of flesh-and-blood men and women.

But criticism of this type of religion—of religion that denies the creative intervention of ordinary human beings, that refuses to allow them to reflect on their own reality and to act upon it to bring about justice—is in fact part of the critique of mainstream religion mounted by liberation theologians. For these are truly *transformative theologies* which call upon people to act to create a just world. That the inspiration for such a praxis is religious need not be a barrier to cooperation between secular and religious activists.

The similarities between Marxism and liberation theologies come in an implicit and explicit class analysis, in giving economic institutions and their core social relations a central place in the analysis, and in seeing unequal power and participation in our society as the result of unequal control over the means of production. That human beings make their own history within the constraints of existing power relations, that they can be united around common interests and oppressions, and that they can understand the forces that oppress them and envision an alternative social order—all these are points of shared belief for both liberation theologians and Marxists.

By reclaiming the Christian message of liberation, people of faith are offering a profound challenge to institutions of injustice and to the pillars of our economic system, whether they know it or not. To those who equate any challenge to the status quo, no matter how motivated, with Communism, the struggle to reclaim the biblical

understanding of justice is called Communist. And the fact that liberation theologies are in many respects consistent with much Marxist analysis—although not with Soviet state practices or other self-serving interpretations of Marx—makes it easier for critics of liberation theologies to label their opponents Communist. But there are *not* two choices, Soviet Communism or U.S. capitalism, as the powers that be would have us believe. That is one of the secrets of liberation theologies. For them, there is at least one other choice, and that derives from the biblically based notion of social justice, which has little in common with either Soviet-style communism or U.S. capitalism. There is no need to choose the lesser of two evils—and *that* is what scares the guardians of the system under which we live.

Ironically, in our so-called free society there cannot at this point in time be an open discussion of Marxism without the charge of "Communist" coming to the fore. Perhaps this is because the defenders of the system know that although Soviet Communism as it is presented to the populace here is not attractive to North Americans, there may be much in Marxism that would be if Marx were studied and understood. But whether this is true or not, it is marginal to what liberation theologies are about. A language that rings as authentically indigenous to North American culture is being forged in the progressive churches. This too is of historic significance. The idiom of liberation theology, the methodology of personal reflection, the social activism and political organization discussed in the essays that follow—all these come from a belief system that is based on an original vision of Christianity. This, not Communism, is the spector that now haunts the principalities and powers of the world.

At a time in U.S. history when the religious right speaks effectively to people's insecurities and to their easily aroused fears, liberation theologies offer an alternative religious discourse that appeals to the best in the collective consciousness. Because liberation theologies respect both individual needs and identities built in community, they are tolerant of other belief systems. They therefore stand in stark opposition to uniformity-demanding visions of a "Christian America." They judge people by their fidelity to love and justice commandments, and not to whether they believe in rituals or personalistic saviors and elect salvation by a faith divorced from how one lives in society.

These are exciting times. The emergence of liberation theologies among peoples and communities marginalized by the powers of this world is an important political fact of our time. A new church is

emerging out of a reflection on the original texts in the light of the realities of human suffering today. The inspiration that the more affluent mainstream churches of North America have received from their sisters and brothers to the south has profoundly shaken the comfortable and challenged them to a new understanding of faith. It is important for both the secular community and for church and synagogue goers to understand the theologies and transformative impulses that are revitalizing the religious life of millions of fellow believers. This volume is an introduction, a start in this process of mutual acquaintance.

Contents

Part II
Reclaiming the Christian Message for the North American Churches

Part III
Marxism and Religion

Part IV
Theology Rooted in the Community

Part I

Theologies of Liberation

The essays in this section discuss the new theologies of liberation that are developing outside the Euro-American white male religious mainstream and are influencing the church both in the third world and, increasingly, in North America as well. These theologies proclaim that the central meaning of the Bible lies in the stories of struggle, liberation, and redemption in which God takes the side of the oppressed. Thus Exodus is the exemplary story of God seeing injustice, taking the side of the afflicted, and helping the people to bring about their own liberation. "I know their sufferings," God tells Moses, "and I have come down to deliver them out of the land of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land" (Exodus 3:7–8). Similarly in the New Testament: here the central event is described in Luke 4:18–19, where Jesus proclaims what can only be seen as a revolutionary message, the likes of which humankind had never heard before. He announces that God has sent him to bring the good news to the poor, to release the captives, to recover sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord—the jubilee year when debts will be forgiven, liberty granted to all inhabitants, and land redistributed so that all can share in the collective fruits of God's gifts and of human labor (Leviticus 25:1–24). Such social relations are "acceptable" to the Lord. The basic theme, then, is that those who do not do justice do not know God.

Liberation theologies with these basic themes are developing in many parts of the world—in Latin America, in Asia, in Africa, each with its own language, each reflecting its particular cultural and

historical setting, but all reflecting on oppression and asking how God would have us act. In Korea, for instance, Minjung theology, or "people's theology"—a poor translation for a very complex idea—is mounting a profound challenge to accommodationist views of the message of the Bible. It sees the Christian task as the creation of the just society God wills, and of a theology built from the bottom up by the little people, who are God's children.

All such theologies are a leaven for societal transformation, and, while not directly political, necessarily have profound political impact if their mission is carried out. And all such theologies are theologies of liberation, but it is what has come to be known as Liberation Theology, which has developed in Latin America, that has had the most profound influence on the North American context. Within the Protestant churches in the United States, but particularly among Catholics, Liberation Theology presents an ecclesiastic challenge to the church hierarchy, a challenge not only to take sides, but to *change* sides.

In Latin America, in part because there was no other refuge from the oppressive tyranny of the police, the army, and the landowners, the church became a center of resistance and a place to reflect on social reality. In countries where to criticize injustice is to court death but where religious belief is officially venerated, reading the Bible with other people became a powerful way of expressing solidarity. What happens when people read together and share their understanding of those biblical passages that bring good news to the captives? In such a context, how do these "communities of the base" (as they have come to be called) understand the following biblical passages?

- Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression . . . (Isaiah 1:17)
- Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? (Isaiah 58:6)
- But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24)
- And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)
- He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. (Luke 1:53)

These are not isolated passages. To Liberation Theologians they, along with the biblical stories of God's intervention, provide a radical message, one that if taken seriously has enormous political consequences. For the oppressed, and for those who stand in soli-

darity with them, to accept the message of liberation as the will of God is to follow the way of the cross, and such a path cannot be chosen without acknowledging the risks. As Oscar Romero, El Salvador's beloved bishop who was murdered by death squads even as he officiated in his cathedral, said, "One who is committed to the poor must run the same fate as the poor. And in El Salvador we know what the fate of the poor signifies: to disappear, to be tortured, to be captive—and to be found dead."

It is perhaps understandable that the oppressed, the marginalized, and the scorned read such texts as the message of God's partisanship—as proclaiming what theologians today call the "preferential option for the poor"—but the comfortable, those who receive the benefits from the system of exploitation, are more likely to spiritualize the message, or to call these quaint Bible stories, or to say that God was around in the world in biblical times but is not now. The first two essays in this section, by Robert McAfee Brown and Rosemary Ruether, focus on the disjuncture between the way that affluent communities and those who understand the Bible from the perspective of the preferential option for the poor can read the same texts and find very different meanings in them.

While it is certainly true that the sharpness of the Latin American struggle, occurring as it has on a continent with strong religious institutions and commitments, has provided fertile soil for the flowering of the mustard seed of Liberation Theology, the initial claim to an almost total uniqueness on the part of some of its exponents has, as a result of contact with the theology of other oppressed groups, given way to an awareness of a universal thread that connects the experiences and theological reflections of all peoples in struggle. Thus the situation of North American blacks, as James Cone demonstrates in his essay, encourages a reading of the gospel message that is similar to that of Latin American Liberation Theologians. Yet it is not that Black Theology derives from Liberation Theology—indeed, as Cone argues, Black Theology antedates the published work of the Latin American Liberation Theologians—but rather that the experience of oppression provides a perspective out of which all theologies of liberation emerge. Blacks in the United States, reflecting on their own history as strangers in a strange land, have also come to recognize this as a new way of doing theology. Martin Luther King, Jr., in one of his last speeches, preached an understanding that parallels that of Oscar Romero:

> On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to