

The initial historical project for liberation theology was the downfall of capitalism, to be replaced by socialism. For liberation theologians, the promise of socialism was the opportunity for the redistribution of wealth to the poor and oppressed throughout the world, among other promising features. However, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1980s, liberation theologians' hopes for socialism were destroyed. In *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto*, Ivan Petrella presents a new future for liberation theology that does not necessitate the overthrow of liberal democracy or capitalism and is based on the guiding principles of classical liberation theology and the social sciences through the development of historical projects.

To begin, Petrella reveals the fact that historical conditions have changed drastically since the heyday of liberation theology in the 1960s, 70s and early 80s. In response to the fall of socialism, liberation theologians did three things: reasserted core ideas, revised the theology's basic categories and critiqued idolatry.<sup>1</sup> These responses, in themselves, Petrella argues, are not adequate for building a practical theology for the oppressed. Petrella insists that liberation theologians must couple the guiding ideas of liberation theology (preferential option for the poor, liberation and the Reign of God)<sup>2</sup> with historical projects that strengthen liberation theology's critique of idolatrous practices and institutions and concretizes the theory of liberation theology.

Clodovis Boff provides for liberation theology a methodology known as *the canonical view*. This methodology outlines four steps for *doing* liberation theology: commitment to the oppressed, using social sciences to reveal the causes of systemic oppression, using Scripture to judge social oppression and developing plans to act in opposition to oppression.<sup>3</sup> Petrella's critique of the canonical view is that the use of social science precedes theological work, and thus the two are artificially and unnecessarily separated. The social sciences are of great resource to persons not only in diagnosing the oppressions within a society, but also in developing responsive action (historical projects) to that oppression.

In chapters 3 and 4, Petrella turns his attention towards a critique of liberation theologians' view of the North American/European model of liberal democracy dysfunctionally applied to Latin

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<sup>1</sup> Ivan Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004) 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-30.

America, and the response to capitalism and its role in the oppression of Latin American peoples. The form of democracy applied to Latin America by North American and European colonialism is assumed to function separately from the economic and social systems that under gird it. Acknowledging the fact that capitalism and liberal democracies are intimately connected, Liberation theologians have employed three methods to resist the continued application of liberal democracy to Latin America, none of which have spawned long-term historical projects.

In response to capitalism, Petrella says that Liberation theologians have again employed three methods. Each of these responses, Petrella says, unnecessarily requires the complete upheaval of whole economic and governmental systems and also portrays capitalism as a hegemonic, all-encompassing beast that can only be resisted and cannot be changed. This view of capitalism only reinforces the plight of the oppressed and in no way inspires historical projects.

In their response to democracy and capitalism, Petrella says that liberation theologians are guilty of employing *Deep Structure Social Theory* and *Institutional Fetishism*. The first implies “that there is a natural order to society...”<sup>4</sup> The latter implies “that there is a natural content for contingent categories.”<sup>5</sup> Petrella says that liberation theologians are wrong to employ either method in their view of society because it leads to radicalization and unrealistic views of social systems, and it squashes any desire to develop attainable historical projects. Petrella uses the social theory of Roberto Unger to portray society differently. Petrella, using Unger’s language, says, “Society ‘works and assumes a definite form because the fighting over all these terms of order is partly interrupted and contained.’”<sup>6</sup> In short, political and economic systems are comprised of much smaller components, developed in response to context and history, that can be changed and developed to reform the system, rather than overthrowing it. Petrella calls for *institutional imagination* as a means for picturing a future for currently oppressive systems in ways that benefit the whole society and world. Concluding his theory, Petrella gives two examples of viable historical projects: one in response to liberal democracy, the other responding to capitalism.

Petrella draws from a variety of social sciences to construct his ideas. Economics, political science, theology, anthropology and others are involved in Petrella’s diagnosis of liberation theology

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 97.

and his construction of future historical projects. For a work on the future of liberation theology, Petrella makes limited use of actual theological themes and ideas, though Petrella makes extensive use of the work of liberation theologians. He uses the social sciences almost exclusively to say that liberation theology has come up short in its attempt to create historical projects. He is convincing of the fact that the end of socialism as a viable global option virtually ended any actual connection between the work of liberation theologians and current political practice. Ultimately, liberation theology has limited itself to abstraction, and is presently unable to assist in actually liberating the oppressed.

Petrella addresses the common critique of his position posed by Johann Baptist Metz. Metz believes that the separation between the social sciences and religious thought is necessary “to ensure the individual’s freedom from a state subject to the permanent temptation to require an all-encompassing allegiance from its citizens.”<sup>7</sup> Petrella responds adequately to this critique in three ways. First, it is not the practice of liberation theology to separate the work of God from the development of earthly justice. Second, Metz’s ideas are in direct response to his own time and place, and therefore not necessarily true in another time and place. Finally, Metz’s critique attempts to create a space for theology to operate that is separate from the ugly realities of the world. It is impossible to do this in reality.

Petrella says, “Liberation theology is caught in a world where misery is rampant and the ‘end of history’ as the end of institutional experiments to address that misery is jubilantly proclaimed.”<sup>8</sup> While it may be an exaggeration to say that the end of efforts to relieve misery is celebrated, Petrella is right to say that theologians, politicians, teachers and others have largely given up on efforts to develop actual projects to relieve the suffering of the oppressed. Petrella is right to say that many people *talk* about the desire to liberate the oppressed. However, the specific efforts being made to reform oppressive economic and governmental systems remain elusive. Petrella is effective in his critique of a theology that is unable to posit historical projects. However, Petrella, himself, makes little effort to pose potential historical projects for the oppressed and their partners. In the end, the question for Petrella is: What are the actual efforts individual persons can make to reform the components of capitalism, democracy and theology that oppress and bind the marginalized?

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 145.