

CALL FOR PAPERS

Liberation Theology and the Other(s): Contextualizing Catholic Activism in 20th Century Latin America

University of Bern, Switzerland, October 19 – 20, 2018

Throughout the past century, political activism within ecclesiastical spheres questioned and challenged both scholarly analysis and popular understanding of the Catholic Church in Latin America and beyond. Since the 1960s, accusations against – and the appraisal of – members of the progressive church, known as ‘red priests’, ‘*marxista en sotana*’, or ‘*bishop of the indians*’, can be found across the Americas. At an institutional level, the Second Vatican Council, and subsequent conferences of the Latin American Episcopacy in Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979), manifested a transnational reform process that led to an aggiornamento of the continental Church. In line with these ecclesiastical reforms, liberation theology emerged in a context of profound political, social, and economic change in the 1960s and 1970s and was celebrated as a new calling for the Church in pursuit of social justice, equality and defense of human rights.

Both the global and continental reform process within the Catholic Church and the development and propagation of liberation theologies have been subject to multiple analyses focusing on the exegeses of ecclesiastical documents and theological debates. Within social sciences and humanities, little empirical research has been conducted on the composition, actuation and legacy of actors of the progressive Church in specific geographic settings and social milieus. Pastoral agents and lay people have been involved in religious activism both within the Church and in a variety of religious and lay organizations. Often working towards the emancipation of the other(s), they addressed the Poor, the Indigenous and the Afro-Descendants, as marginalized groups suffering from oppressive political and social structures. While strongly emphasizing the agency and self-determination of the other(s), progressive Catholics experienced the dilemma of overcoming paternalism within a context where social and cultural subjects “in need of liberation” had to be imagined and addressed from a religious perspective.

Assessing these social entanglements requires research proposals that consider knowledge production as well as power relations situated in local, regional, national, and transnational contexts. A critical analysis that aims at challenging and expanding existing scholarship should therefore not only address how religious discourses and practices are targeted towards faith communities, but also how they were received, remodeled, or contested.

The 50th anniversary of the Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopacy in Medellín is an opportunity to reflect and discuss concrete repercussions that progressive Catholicism

had on societies in Latin America. Focusing on interdisciplinary, empirical research, the conference will address four topical areas related to research on progressive Catholicism and its relation to the other(s):

A. Social Movements and Collective Identities

Ecclesiastical actors were heavily involved in social mobilization and identity politics in urban and rural areas. Particular attention will be paid to the connections between representatives of the progressive church and grassroots mobilization, e.g. movements based on class, ethnicity / race, or gender.

B. State and NGOs

The political conflicts during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, ranging from revolution(s) to authoritarian states, conditioned the spheres of influence of the progressive church. The discussion should open new fields of analysis in terms of the actuation of the church in the public sphere, and the relationship between church and state or non-governmental organizations, with special regards to the national and transnational circulation of ideas (e.g. political ideologies, development paradigms, human rights discourses).

C. Transnational Entanglements of the Progressive Church

The exchange of ideas, people, and resources within religious networks and lay organizations can be analyzed from a transnational and global perspective. Besides the well-explored North-South connections, we are particularly interested in exploring South-South connections and exchange within and beyond the Catholic Church.

D. Revising the History of 20th Century Catholicism

The papal calls for mission, the Second Vatican Council, the Latin American Episcopal Conferences, and especially pastoral and social practices of progressive clerical sectors had a long-lasting impact on popular perception and scholarly research. Historiographic discussion should therefore focus on the practices of memory and myth construction as well as past and current interpretations of Catholic activism across the Americas and beyond.

We would like to invite historians and other colleagues from the social sciences and the humanities who can contribute to any of the above mentioned topics and perspectives. Notwithstanding our focus on liberation theology, we also welcome contributions that cross classical periodical and thematic

boundaries, expanding the perspective e.g. to discourses and practices linked to Catholic Action, Contextual Theology or Protestant churches.

Languages: English / Spanish / Portuguese

Travel and accommodation costs will be covered thanks to funding by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Please send a title and an abstract (approx. 300 words) of your proposal to keith.cann@hist.unibe.ch **by January 19, 2018.**

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