
Article

From revolutionary texts to rebellious readers: What is *Leitura Popular da Bíblia* and is it really ‘popular’?

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Abstract

Inspired by Paulo’s Freire’s popular education for adults and liberation theology’s ‘option for the poor’, *Leitura Popular da Bíblia* (LPB) was pioneered among poor urban and rural communities throughout Latin America. It emphasised participatory methodologies, critical thinking and community solutions to problems interpreted as political. Importantly, in its early phase, it accompanied and was inserted into revolutionary political and social movements. This article addresses the methodology of LPB and asks critical questions about the notion of ‘popular’ deployed by some liberation theologies. It problematises the community-based presentation of popular in LPB and asks how LPB can transgress its traditional spaces – favelas, factories, student unions – into newly politicised territories that root emancipatory practices in gender, race and (inter-)religious experiences. The article draws on insights from the experiences of LPB currently used in popular movements in Brazil and Latin America, and considers the wider implications for LPB in light of changing popular experiences and changing practices in revolutionary political and social movements.

Keywords: *Leitura Popular da Bíblia*; popular education; Paulo Freire; liberation theology; *comunidades eclesiais de base* (CEBs); option for the poor; Solentiname

Introduction

Leitura Popular da Bíblia (LPB) is a movement and a methodology for reading the Bible which is frequently viewed through the lens of liberation theology and *comunidades eclesiais de base* (CEBs; 'basic Christian communities'). This article addresses the methodology of LPB and asks critical questions about the notion of 'popular' deployed by some liberation theologies. While the word 'popular' is used consistently in relation to LPB and those associated with liberation theology and CEBs, differing understandings of it emerge as a concept. The term 'popular' among biblical scholars committed to liberation theology is different from the changing contexts of popular and social movements in Latin American social theory. Noting the ongoing links between LPB and Paulo Freire's popular education, the article proposes making a popular hermeneutic turn by identifying rebellious readers in Latin America. This problematising of community-based presentations of popular in LPB asks how LPB can transgress its traditional spaces – favelas, factories, student unions – into newly politicised territories that root emancipatory practices in gender, race and (inter-)religious experiences.

In Latin America, people reach for the example of Bible reading from Ernesto Cardenal's little fishing and monastic-artistic community in Solentiname. It is the art – the poetry and the painting – as much as the struggles for interpretation of the Bible which were documented by Cardenal that give shape to a popular practice of reading the Bible. In this case, the term 'popular' is applied to the bringing together of an artist's colony and a peasant community.

In 1965, Cardenal consciously founded his Solentiname community with a participatory methodology that aspired to social equality and communal sharing. It was anti-American (anti-Imperialist) and resisted the Somoza dictatorship. He pioneered some innovations in the Mass, incorporating group readings and open discussions of the biblical text, thereby displacing the authority of the priest and the Vulgate (Latin) translation of the Bible. In addition, the little chapel which had been designed and built by one of the resident artists purposely doubled as a community centre, providing space for artistic workshops, educational initiatives and political discussions.

Solentiname exerted widespread influence on the imaginary of the Latin American Left. Following his visit to Solentiname, the Argentinian writer Julio Cortazar based a short story on his experiences and aided the dispersion and discussion of Solentiname in left-wing artistic and intellectual circles. His short story, 'Apocalipsis de Solentiname', was published along with other writings in the book *Alguien que anda por ahí* in 1977. It was censored by military dictatorship across Latin America.

Cardenal's participation in the revolutionary Sandinistas gave credence to his 'popular practice'. Ernesto Cardenal was one of three high-profile Roman Catholic priests to serve in the Sandinista government after the 1978 revolution. He was Minister of Culture. His brother Fernando Cardenal was Minister of Education and Miguel d'Escoto was Minister of Foreign Affairs. Moreover, as a priest, Cardenal benefited from the emerging networks of support in a Roman Catholic Church embracing new directions after Vatican II, including the opening of the Church to the ecumenical movement, which was to usher in important support for popular experiences and experiments.

While Solentiname captures the romance of LPB, it is important to mention Paulo Freire who pioneered popular education literacy programmes while living in Brazil. Freire disseminated his popular education practices worldwide when he opted to work for the ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches in Geneva rather than Harvard University when he went into exile from Brazil during the military dictatorship. However, other names and initiatives have been important to the dissemination, documentation of and reflection about LPB throughout Latin America. These include the Ecumenical Centre for Bible Study (*Centro de Estudos Bíblicos* – CEBI) founded in 1979 and the work of a number of biblical scholars such as Carlos Mesters and Milton Schwantes in Brazil, J. Severino Croatto in Argentina, Pablo Richard in Chile and Elsa Tamez in Costa Rica.¹

The hegemony of CEBI on LPB, coupled with the influence of biblical scholars and indeed the relationship between popular Bible reading and biblical scholarship in Brazil, raises a number of questions about the term 'popular' in LPB. Ernesto Cardenal's popular of artists and peasants is recognisably popular to Marxist theorists and revolutionary movements, indeed it draws directly on the work of cultural theorists in the Frankfurt School and on Che Guevara's *foco* strategy for fomenting revolution. In other words,

Solentiname is directly inspired by the Cuban revolution and its policy to export revolution across the continent. The Bible reading at Solentiname and the practices associated with it are a direct application of political and social hermeneutics to usher in (revolutionary) change in historical circumstances. In the case of LPB and the work of biblical scholars such as Mesters, Schwantes, Croatto, Richard and Tamez, this explicit relationship between popular Bible reading and revolution is more complex as I outline below.

The case of the biblical scholars

In a now-iconic publication – *A Bíblia como Memória dos Pobres* [The Bible as the Memory of the Poor] – Carlos Mesters, Pablo Richard and Milton Schwantes tried to establish the premises of Bible reading in Latin America. In his contribution, ‘Como se faz teologia bíblica no Brasil hoje’ [How to do biblical theology in Brazil today], Mesters described the twin influences of a renewed exegetical method in Europe in the twentieth century and the fact that those committed to LPB all studied in Europe under the influence of the renewal movement. Mesters affirms, ‘Brazilian exegesis is an extension of European exegesis’.²

However, Mesters went on to note that while there has been a certain crisis within the renewed exegetical method in Europe, namely that it was becoming increasingly specialised and fragmented in the academy and distancing itself from the questions arising from people’s faith, there is now a new biblical theology in Brazil which he calls LPB. He describes it as ‘the people reclaiming the Bible and reading it ... from the perspective of the problems and struggles of their life’.³

In a brief summary, he outlined some contributing factors to the emergence of LPB including, Vatican II and the Latin American Episcopal Conferences of Medellín and Puebla, the liturgical renewal movement, Catholic Action’s methodology of see–judge–act, the challenge presented by Protestantism (which uses the Bible more than Roman Catholicism) and a political situation of repression.⁴ This new biblical theology – which Mesters calls LPB – draws on the experiences of CEBs and feeds their struggle.

However, in this reflection and in another published in English in the classic edited volume *The Bible and Liberation*,⁵ Mesters makes no reference to Paulo Freire and the popular education movement, and beyond hinting at concerns of living in a military dictatorship, he brings no perspective from the Cuban revolution and the struggles (and strategies) of the Left across Latin America. Liberation theology, which proposes theology as a ‘second step’, and as a critical reflection on the praxis of revolutionary action (Gutierrez, Shaull, Míguez Bonino), is inspired as much by the events of 1959 in Cuba as it is by Vatican II.⁶ In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutierrez notes:

contemporary theology does in fact find itself in direct and fruitful confrontation with Marxism, and it is to a large extent due to Marxism’s influence that theological thought, searching for its own sources, has begun to reflect on the meaning of the transformation of this world and human action in history.⁷

José Míguez Bonino famously records an exchange in a church in a shanty town in Uruguay in his book *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, ‘Who is Jesus Christ? ... Jesus Christ is Che Guevara’.⁸ Gutierrez and Míguez Bonino explicitly approached theology in the context of revolutions in Latin America. Later liberation theologians including Ivan Petrella and Marcella Althaus-Reid have been quick to point out this foundational basis, independent of Church and State, for liberation theology. Petrella points out that ‘Latin American liberation theology was born at the crossroads of a changing Catholic church and the revolutionary political-economic foment of the late 1960s and early 1970s.’⁹ Meanwhile, Althaus-Reid emphasises, ‘The crisis of the 1950s in Latin America, including the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, produced a change of consciousness in the continent’s perception of both the ethos of theology and the role of the church in the continent’.¹⁰ Mesters’s proposal that Latin American approaches to Bible reading – LPB – are an extension of European biblical scholarship reading the Bible with CEBs with the tools of sociology, appears to forget liberation theology’s methodology as outlined by Gutierrez, Míguez Bonino, Petrella and Althaus-Reid, among others. Where is Mesters’s engagement with revolutionary struggle?

To add more complexity to the emerging picture, in Mesters’s contribution to the edited volume *The Bible and Liberation*, the term ‘grassroots Christian communities’ is deployed instead of the more

common 'basic Christian communities' to describe the CEBs. This is even more surprising because the chapter originally appeared in an English edited book on Basic Christian Communities.¹¹ Substituting 'base' with 'grassroots' removes the class struggle perspective from Mesters's contribution, something that is important to understanding LPB and especially the wider influence of liberation theology on basic Christian communities. Luis Fernandes notes that CEBs are born in popular struggles in favelas,¹² while Leonardo Boff insists that CEBs signify a new theological experience for the Church. Boff argues that it is not possible to reduce interpretations of CEBs to Roman Catholic 'new evangelisation' in Latin America, nor to an interpretation of an extension of the old parish model.¹³ For Boff, CEBs are the sign of a popular Church, which is comprised of the poor, engaged with other churches and social movements.¹⁴ While Boff is theologically articulate and explicit about the CEBs and the 'option for the poor', Mesters describes LPB as 'a community of people meeting around the Bible who inject concrete reality and their own situation into the discussion' without a class struggle perspective.¹⁵ Therefore, we might ask who is 'the community' and is it 'popular'?

According to Pablo Richard, 'the community' is 'a new subject: every baptized person who reads and interprets the Bible'.¹⁶ In his article, which appeared in the same iconic publication as Mesters's, he focused more widely on hopes for 'community reading of the Bible'. Richard's proposal, however, is slightly narrower (or more ecclesial) in scope than in his earlier work, which had looked at the 'new subject' through the 'option for the poor' and stated 'discerning the subject who reads the Bible, and explains the Bible ... The Bible is only an instrument of liberating evangelization when it is read by the poor in the perspective of the poor'.¹⁷ The distinction is small but important. The move made by Richard from 'poor' to 'baptized' introduces an ecclesial rather than social class basis and definition for LPB. Not all baptised people are poor; equally not all poor people are baptised. Richard originally suggested that biblical exegesis only has a role when it is placed at the service of the poor. He began a research project that proposed the Bible as a collection of (suppressed) stories of subversion and struggles for liberation of the poor. He used the renewed biblical scholarship, particularly sociology, to promote this understanding of the Bible in groups of LPB.

Richard recognised that 'to speak of the poor, however, is to speak of a collective and conflicted subject. It deals with the poor people, with the poor as a class, group or mixture of exploited social sectors or oppressed races.'¹⁸ In this earlier phase, Richard was looking to apply Marxist social theory to both the 'new subject' and to the composition of the Bible. In his latter article, this recognisably Marxist 'new subject' has transitioned to become primarily an 'ecclesial subject' – 'every baptized person'.

Richard also reinforces Mesters's perspective when he describes an ecclesial hermeneutics for the 'new subject':

Traditionally, two interpretative subjects are affirmed: the professional exegete, who provides a scientific interpretation of the Bible, and a representative of the *magisterium*, who provides a magisterial and authoritative interpretation of the Bible. Today, we look to construct a third interpretative subject of the word of God: all baptized who read and interpret the Bible in the midst of an ecclesial community ... This subject is not alone, receiving help from biblical scholarship and the *magisterium*.¹⁹

The 'ecclesial hermeneutic' suggested by Richard and Mesters is some distance from the popular practice of Ernesto Cardenal and Paulo Freire. It also demonstrates the differing approaches among liberation theologians to understandings that theology and Bible reading are autonomous of the Church and State. Mesters and Richard appear to favour autonomy from the State but some degree of relationship to the Church. Boff – at least until his silencing in 1984 – favoured autonomy from both, perhaps reflecting his experiences of military dictatorship and authoritarian church. Marcella Althaus-Reid has also wryly observed that, writing in the late 1980s, Clodovis and Leonardo Boff reinforce the current that the popular theologian is slowly removed from associations with the guerrilla priest and becomes a theologian of life, distinguishing him (and it was generally a man) from professional theologians. It also elides the 'popular theologian' with 'the parish priest' or 'the Bishop' working with poor communities.²⁰ In short, it removes the popular from theology and focuses on an ecclesial hermeneutic.

Such a theological approach is not fully reflective of the popular practice of LPB. According to a CEBI, LPB in Brazil is organised by a coordinating group in 25 (of 26) states. It has a presence in over 600 Brazilian cities. The report notes that CEBI has been directly responsible for creating over 100 popular movements, and that it accompanies over 250 groups and social movements in Brazil. CEBI also estimates that in 25 per cent of the towns and cities where it is active, its participants are active in ‘popular participation’ through town councils and work related to education, health, children and young people’s rights, and social action. Furthermore, CEBI is involved with concrete examples of popular economy including craftwork, collective food production, cooperatives and cultural initiatives.²¹

However, the ‘ecclesial hermeneutic’ proposed by Mesters and Richard presents significant challenges to LPB. At the twenty-first national assembly of CEBI in 2017, Secretary Edmilson Schinelo reported on the ecumenical nature of the organisation. Of the state councils 58.3 per cent reported that they were ecumenical while 41.7 per cent informed that they were not.²² The churches, other than the Roman Catholic Church, involved with CEBI included: the Baptist Church, Bethesda Church, the Episcopal Anglican Church in Brazil, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brazil, the Evangelical Neopentecostal Church, the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church of Brazil and the Independent Presbyterian Church of Brazil.²³ The information in Schinelo’s report does not permit a comprehensive classification because it is not clear which actual churches are referred to all cases in the list. For example, is the Evangelical Neopentecostal Church a specific church or a loose reference to wider Neopentecostal participation?

However, the information does permit a cursory theological observation. Only the Episcopal Anglican Church in Brazil, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brazil, the Methodist Church in Brazil and the Independent Presbyterian Church of Brazil are formally members of the ecumenical movement along with the Roman Catholic Church (in Brazil or through the World Council of Churches (WCC)). Despite the efforts of international theological dialogues, particularly the WCC Faith and Order Commission’s *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, it has been a struggle for churches to reach a mutual agreement with the Roman Catholic Church on recognition of baptism.²⁴ In other words, while ecumenical participants may consider themselves ‘baptized persons’, it is not clear if any church, Roman Catholic or other, accords an ecclesial status to the participants. Schinelo also notes that some other religions are present in CEBI’s LPB: Spiritism, Candomblé and Shamanism.²⁵ In this case, the ‘ecclesial hermeneutic’ is ruptured, in addition to the focus on a subject who is ‘any baptized person’. We will return to discuss this proposed ‘ecclesial hermeneutic’ of LPB later in this article.

While Mesters and Richard worked within the European exegetical historical-critical method and promoted this within LPB, J. Severino Croatto preferred to develop a ‘hermeneutics of liberation’ through his biblical scholarship and work with LPB.²⁶ Influenced by Paul Ricoeur and French structuralism, Croatto searched for a hermeneutic which not only encompasses a ‘new subject’ – such as Mesters and Richard – but which alights on a ‘new authority’.²⁷

According to Croatto, as long as LPB works primarily with a ‘new subject’ *alongside* the traditional methodologies of biblical scholarship and ecclesial tradition, it does not displace the authority of the Bible as a producer of meaning. In other words, Croatto is concerned with contesting meanings and displacing the author intention in a search for an original meaning for the biblical text in groups of LPB. He is interested in trying to discover how LPB produces meaning that does not rely on the status of a biblical text, or on authorities – the exegete or *magisterium* – interpreting the text. Croatto’s proposal is that it is in the encounter of a text – its historical and textual-linguistic world – with the reader (and not only the subjectivity of the reader) in which LPB engages in a Ricoeurian ‘conflict of interpretations’.²⁸

At stake for Croatto is that LPB should not let itself be seduced by a closed canon of meaning in the biblical text.²⁹ In this case, Croatto’s proposal for a ‘hermeneutics of liberation’ places LPB not within a story of renewed exegetical methods, which interprets Latin American exegesis as an extension of European biblical scholarship, but as rupture with exegesis and a move towards an ongoing search for meaning-signifiers for those who read the Bible. These meaning-signifiers may come from the Cuban revolution as in the case of Ernesto Cardenal’s popular Bible reading in Solentiname, or from popular and social movements as in the case of CEBI Brazil. Croatto’s hermeneutical approach also challenges Mesters’s and Richard’s ecclesial narrowing of the ‘new subject’ of LPB. Baptism – a canonical act – is

not necessarily an entry point or basis for reading the Bible for Croatto, as has been suggested by Mesters and Richard.

The case of popular and social movements

LPB has some relation to popular movements (or social movements). According to Latin American social movement theory, not all popular movements are social movements, and equally not all social movements are popular. A popular movement is rooted in a class-based understanding of Latin American societies. Moreover, popular is associated with working-class or ‘community-based initiatives in poor neighbourhoods’. The support of trade unions, intellectuals and left-wing political parties, alongside the influence of liberation theology and its associated pastoral practices has been identified as organisationally important to the popular movement.³⁰ In addition, popular movements are normally, but not exclusively urban, and emerge in the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America during a time of dictatorship.

This makes popular movements distinct from social movements which, in this class-based analysis, are frequently (although not exclusively) middle-class. The social movement aspires to horizontal social relations of power within their organisations and movements. While most middle-class actors will have links to left-wing political parties, it is not so much a question of their party affiliation and more a question of the opportunities that these links create for access to resources that is important. In a redemocratised Latin America, middle-class social movements will diversify, institutionalise and professionalise becoming NGOs, think tanks or consultancies, among other possibilities.

This narrative and the conception of popular movements as a class-based movement rooted in community practices in poor neighbourhoods points to some aspects of the influences on LPB. The importance of the dictatorship helps to inform readings and practices that are committed to models of democracy among the participants. The links to trade unions and political parties situates firmly on the political left groups of LPB. Indeed, in the 1980s in Brazil, the theologians Leonardo and Clodovis Boff actively canvassed in an assembly of CEBs – and therefore of groups of LPB – for their dissolution and formal entry into the Workers’ Party (PT) in preparation for redemocratisation. Furthermore, experiences of collective rights, including cooperation and a questioning of social relations of power, underpin experiences of LPB.

However, this narrative and conception provokes some difficulties for LPB. First, in countries such as Bolivia, Brazil, Nicaragua and Venezuela, it has been closely associated with experiences of left-wing governments. In other words, while the assembly of CEBs in the 1980s rejected formal affiliation with the PT in Brazil, in many cases LPB has become imprisoned to the agenda of the PT, or the Movement Towards Socialism in Bolivia, the (now almost unrecognisable) Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the Socialist Party of Venezuela. The aspirations to horizontalism in social and power relations is substituted, particularly in election cycles, by older vertical assumptions about taking control of the state with a revolutionary few governing in the interests of the many.

Within Latin American social movement theory horizontalism has been interpreted as, ‘a rejection of the modern revolutionary strategy of vanguardism, where an elite leadership is deemed necessary for creating the conditions of social change, leading revolutionary participants through the destruction of the *ancien régime* and governing once the revolution has seized state power’.³¹ This practice of mixing horizontalism and verticalism within LPB undermines its collective and participatory nature, at times restricting it to *realpolitik* of left-wing parties in elections. It also leads to unresolved practical questions for LPB specifically with regard to mass participation and traditional structures of power. LPB may well be popular and widespread in Latin America, but it is not a mass movement and depends on vertical power relations in trade unions, political parties and churches to sustain its popular approach.

Second, with a class-based approach, LPB has followed the movements of feminism (perhaps better described in LPB as *mujerista*), black people’s movements, indigenous peoples’ and LGBTQ+ movements and other issues of identity. At the same time, on the one hand, LPB has not sufficiently scrutinised and resolved internally if this is an imposition of agendas by a professionalised middle-class social movement onto the popular movements. On the other hand, it has not coherently developed a *leitura popular* methodology – how to read into and out of Bible stories these experiences – because it does

not always share a hermeneutical key with the movements in question due to the exegetical influences identified by Mesters and Richard in their historical-critical and sociological approach to the Bible. It is only with the nudge from each emerging movement that the Bible is read not only as a historical memory of the poor – as Richard had suggested – but as a historical memory of poor women, poor black people, poor indigenous people, poor queer people and so on.

If, on the one hand, LPB has been constrained by exegetical options made by biblical scholars who support the movement, on the other, it has been constrained by political options within social movement theory. It has largely remained identified with left-wing party politics working within a theory of taking control of the state. This appears in its strong commitment to democracy, and in the activism in trade unions and political parties by its practitioners. Its imaginary therefore is outlined by examples from Ernesto Cardenal and Che Guevara, rather than the Zapatistas or Occupy movement.³²

Paulo Freire and popular education

LPB strongly draws on Paulo Freire's methodologies, experiences and practices. Edmilson Schinelo points to some questions for groups of LPB which help to describe 'popular education': 'Is there intentionality in terms of education in our activity? Is it possible to identify a participative and collective characteristic in the activity? Is a critical consciousness of reality awakened (not by us but by the process)? Does the activity guarantee an immersion into the popular culture? Does it provide development of political consciousness towards the construction of a historical process, by popular sectors?'.³³ According to Schinelo, it is the participative conscientisation toward the construction of historical projects that distinguishes 'popular education'.

In light of this, Schinelo notes that in its 'heroic period' (1960s–80) 'popular education' had the socialist ideal as a historical project. The dictatorships in Latin America helped to produce a number of social movements with roots in 'popular education'. And, by the 1970s and 1980s, with the urgency of the Cuban revolution receding, 'popular education' diversifies into other fields – gender, ecology, ethnicity, children's and adolescent rights – and opens dialogue (sometimes reluctantly) between popular movements and social movements along class-based lines.³⁴

Another aspect that has become increasingly important to LPB and to 'popular education' has been what Schinelo calls 'the rediscovery of culture'.³⁵ In this, Schinelo points to the influence of Theodor Adorno and his ideas of educative processes as cultural production to transform societies. Equally, Paulo Freire's discovery of a dialogical culture through cultural circles and the importance of ideas, images and imagination have influenced LPB.³⁶

Maria Soave has also pointed out that not all education processes use participatory education methods.³⁷ LPB, with its roots in Paulo Freire, 'popular education' and cultural circles understands that education begins with the lived experiences of each participant.³⁸ The group reflections are searches for shared narratives between life experiences and the Bible, helping people to reflect critically on their lived reality in order to propose common actions for the popular movement.

However, Schinelo affirms that 'popular education' as a movement in Latin America has roots in the Christian world. From this affirmation, he advocates an LPB which takes into account the cultural history of the Bible, not only historical-critical exegesis or sociological readings of the Bible. This is a slight adaptation of Richard's and Mesters's proposals for LPB. Schinelo prefers to see the Bible as the cultural experiences of the identity categories of poor, women, black people, creation and so on. This insight enables LPB to continue to accompany popular movements and their struggles in a period when historical projects of social transformation have become less visible and where strategies of popular and social movements have become diversified between vertical and horizontal theories of social change.

However, by insisting that 'popular education' and LPB in Latin America has roots in the Christian world, Schinelo also restricts LPB. The approaches suggested by Mesters (historical-critical exegesis), Richard (sociological readings of the Bible) and Schinelo (cultural experiences in the Bible) all, if fully explored, potentially lead to an understanding that the Bible is not necessarily only a Christian text. However, Mesters, Richard and Schinelo do not follow the developments in their respective fields, instead choosing to place a biblical scholarship (from the early to mid-twentieth century) at the service of the

‘new subject’. With the strong emphasis on European exegetical methods at the service of the people, contemporary biblical scholarship that views the Bible through inter-religious or post-colonial analysis is currently largely neglected by LPB.

An important challenge arises for LPB if the ‘new subject’ is not Christian – an example could be the black people’s movement linked to Afro-Brazilian religions or the indigenous world of many worlds emerging from the Zapatistas’ struggle. How is this cultural experience read into the Bible in LPB? This is an important question for ‘popular education’ and LPB. Some liberation theologians have questioned if Latin America was ever Christianised.³⁹ Such an approach opens liberation theology to other epistemological approaches in Latin America, but it has not been the preferred approach within Latin American liberation theology. Other aspects of liberation theology have developed into fruitful dialogues with post-colonialism (Dussel, Isasi Diaz), which in turn questions colonial readings of Latin America (including its Christian roots) bringing to the fore searches for other kinds of knowledge.⁴⁰ If, as João Jairo Oliveira de Carvalho has argued, ‘for *Leitura Popular da Bíblia*, popular is related to a way of being in the world’, can this way of being in the world be something other than Christian in Latin America?⁴¹

Oliveira de Carvalho notes that the popular movement is non-confessional and non-partisan, it uses theatre, circus, sewing, community allotments, community pharmacies, professional training. All the methods – recreational, productive and organisational – are strategically directed to a critique of neoliberalism and are rooted in class-based organisations (trade unions), class-associated movements (ethnic minorities) or classless organisations (ecological movements).⁴² While Oliveira de Carvalho’s perspective is perhaps a little naïve (or too ideological), it confirms the diversification in LPB and ‘popular education’ as it has wrestled with shifting from vertical to horizontal social transformation.

Newly politicised territories and emancipatory practices

Hans de Wit has suggested that LPB needs not only a subversive biblical text, but also a subversive reader.⁴³ Drawing on the work of Nancy Pereira Cardoso, as well as Elsa Tamez, de Wit notes that while LPB has worked primarily to recover the suppressed memory of the biblical text – as a suppressed memory of the poor under the influence of Mesters, Richard and Schwantes – it has also required ‘rebellious readers’ who recreate the texts or the canon.⁴⁴ Accordingly, de Wit sees Cardoso and Tamez drawing close to the hermeneutic of liberation proposed by Croatto in a search for new meaning-signifiers. At the same time, Cardoso and Tamez, as rebellious readers, search for what is lost in the text through an engagement with theories of deconstruction and reconstruction.

De Wit also observes that by looking to ‘rebellious readers’ rather than subversive biblical texts, LPB, particularly that practised by Ernesto Cardenal in Solentiname, is revealed to be recreating or reconstructing post-colonial gospels.⁴⁵ The danger is not subversive texts as has been the major interpretation of authoritarian governments and churches across Latin America, but the rebellious reader reconstructing a post-colonial gospel of insurgency. In the example from Solentiname, it is the readers that are of interest – the peasants, artists, activists – and the meaning-signifiers (not always canonical) that emerge in their readings of biblical texts. Cardenal’s post-colonial gospels situate LPB in a post-colonial popular world struggling against (American) imperialism – a vertical struggle – and creating alternatives to neoliberalism through cooperatives and emancipatory participation – a horizontal struggle.

Nancy Pereira Cardoso and Elsa Tamez are both committed to LPB and its ‘rebellious readers’. Cardoso works with the CPT and the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) in Brazil and has promoted and facilitated LPB in the land struggle in Brazil. Tamez, having taught biblical studies in Latin America and the USA, has focused on developing circles of women readers – drawing on Paulo Freire’s cultural circles – in Central America. This work is documented in her contribution to the book *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*.⁴⁶

Cardoso and Tamez occupy newly politicised territories in Latin America and move within horizontal theories of social change that emphasise participation and address questions of social and power relations, particularly through feminist and gender studies. They are committed to ‘popular movements’ and ‘popular struggles’. It is from within these struggles that their practice of LPB emerges. They do not reference ecclesial narratives of church councils or church pastoral concerns, or even movements within

(European) biblical scholarship in their work with LPB. Instead, they refer to the ‘popular struggles’, rooting rebellious readers in the particular questions faced by each ‘popular struggle’ be it feminist (*mujerista*), land, indigenous, black or post-colonial. The rebellious readers are not primarily concerned with ecclesial rebellion, but a state rebellion. In this, Cardoso and Tamez differ from Mesters, Richard and Schwantes and demonstrate the variety of approaches within LPB. They also help LPB recover the theological methodology of Gutierrez, Shaull and Míguez Bonino of doing theology in revolutionary social and political contexts.

Conclusion

LPB was pioneered among poor urban and rural communities throughout Latin America. Inspired by Paulo’s Freire’s popular education for adults and liberation theology’s ‘option for the poor’, LPB emphasised participatory methodologies, critical thinking and community solutions to problems interpreted as political.⁴⁷ Importantly, in its early phase, it accompanied and was inserted inside revolutionary political and social movements with Ernesto Cardenal’s community in Solentiname providing one of the iconic examples of this new approach.

LPB has been interpreted by Latin American biblical scholars as an extension of European biblical exegesis, alongside the introduction of a new subject. While Cardenal’s approach described the new subject as ‘peasant’ and ‘revolutionary’ – in other words a political subject – biblical scholars narrowed the new subject from ‘poor’ to ‘poor and baptised’ – in other words an ecclesial subject. This gives an ecclesial bias and Christian root to LPB, which is not fully reflective of the popular movements who read the Bible in this way.

LPB, as part of the popular movements in Latin America, uses a class-based analysis of Latin America and the biblical text. It is influenced by vertical theories of social change through its traditional relationship with left-wing political parties and trade unions. It has also demonstrated horizontal approaches to social change – more commonly associated with (middle-class) social movements in Latin America that have focused on questions of gender, class, race/ethnicity, ecology, indigeneity and so on. Drawing on Paulo Freire’s cultural circles and emphasising participation and emancipation without necessarily having recourse the state, LPB is forging horizontal popular practices of social and political change.

Through this problematising of the community-based presentation of popular in LPB – addressing questions of vertical or horizontal social and political change – the challenge for LPB is to transgress its traditional spaces – favelas, factories, student unions – and vertical theories of social and political transformation by horizontalising in newly politicised territories that root emancipatory practices in gender, race and (inter-)religious experiences.

The rebellious reader – drawn from the work of Nancy Pereira Cardoso and Elsa Tamez with LPB – enables changing popular experiences and changing practices in revolutionary political and social movements to remain the hermeneutical key to searches for liberation in Latin America. It displaces the authority of the biblical text, ecclesial canon and unresolved (internal) debates about the new subject, locating rebellious readers in Latin America inside revolutionary movements (Zapatistas), social movements and ‘popular movements’.

Author biography

Graham McGeoch is a theologian and minister of the Church of Scotland. He teaches Theology and Religious Studies at Faculdade Unida de Vitória, Brazil. He has research interests in theology and social sciences, and Latin America.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work.

Notes

¹ Carlos Mesters is a Dutch priest and biblical scholar who lived in Brazil from 1949. He studied theology in Rome and Jerusalem. He pioneered LPB in base Christian communities and was one of the founders

of the Centre for Bible Study (CEBI) in Brazil in 1979. Milton Schwantes was a Brazilian Lutheran minister and biblical scholar. He studied theology in São Leopoldo, Brazil and at the University of Heidelberg, Germany. He was the founder of *Revista de Interpretação Bíblica Latino-Americana* (RIBLA) in 1988, which promoted exegesis and biblical studies through a sociological (Marxist) approach in a Latin American context. J. Severino Croatto was an Argentinian biblical scholar. He studied theology in Buenos Aires, Rome and Jerusalem. He taught theology at ISEDET from 1975 (the Evangelical Institute of Theological Studies in Buenos Aires) and facilitated groups of LPB. Croatto created a new biblical hermeneutics – inspired by Paul Ricoeur – whereby the interpretation of the text offered meaning. Pablo Richard is a Chilean biblical scholar. He studied philosophy in Vienna and theology in Santiago, Rome and Jerusalem. He lived in France in exile from 1973 to 1978, completing a PhD in sociology at Sorbonne. He has taught theology at DEI (the Ecumenical Research Department) in Costa Rica since 1978. Elsa Tamez is a Mexican biblical scholar. She studied theology in São José, Costa Rica, in addition to linguistics and literature. She then studied theology at the University of Lausanne. She introduced feminist hermeneutics to LPB and taught theology at DEI and was Rector of the Latin American Biblical University in Costa Rica (1995–2000). She was a visiting professor at Harvard in 2002.

² Carlos Mesters, ‘Como se faz Teologia Bíblica no Brasil Hoje’, *Estudos Bíblicos* 1 (1987): 7–19, at 8.

³ Mesters, ‘Como se faz Teologia Bíblica’: 9.

⁴ Mesters, ‘Como se faz Teologia Bíblica’: 9.

⁵ Carlos Mesters, ‘The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities of the Common People’, in *The Bible and Liberation*, edited by Norman K. Gottwald and Richard A. Horsley (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 3–16.

⁶ Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian priest, wrote *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 2001 [1971]), drawing theology in Latin America into a reflection on revolutionary praxis. M. Richard Shaull was a Protestant North American missionary to Colombia and Brazil. He was among the first theologians in Latin America to argue that revolution was the priority facing Latin American Christians and that theology and the church must engage with the revolutions on the continent. He sets out this idea in his book, *Encounter with Revolution* (New York: Haddam House, 1955). José Míguez Bonino was an Argentinian Protestant minister and professor of theology who wrote *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1975).

⁷ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 53.

⁸ Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology*, 2.

⁹ Ivan Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 1.

¹⁰ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 126.

¹¹ Gottwald and Horsley’s volume considers political and social hermeneutics from theologians and biblical scholars around the world. Mesters’s contribution is drawn from an earlier book focused explicitly on Latin American Basic Christian Communities. Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, eds., *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981).

¹² Luis Fernandes, *Como se Faz uma Comunidade Eclesial de Base* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1984), 12.

¹³ Leonardo Boff, *Eclesiogênese: A Reinvenção da Igreja* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2008), 18.

¹⁴ Boff, *Eclesiogênese*, 244.

¹⁵ Mesters, ‘The Use of the Bible in Christian Communities’, 6.

¹⁶ Pablo Richard, ‘Cinco pequenas esperanças na leitura comunitária da Bíblia’, *Revista de Interpretação Bíblica Latino-Americana* 39 (2001): 7–9, at 7.

¹⁷ Pablo Richard, ‘Bíblia: Memória Histórica dos Pobres’, *Estudos Bíblicos* 1 (1987): 20–30, at 20.

¹⁸ Richard, ‘Bíblia: Memória Histórica’: 20.

¹⁹ Richard, ‘Cinco pequenas esperanças’: 8.

²⁰ Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology*, 138.

²¹ See the Centro de Estudos Bíblicos website: www.cebi.org.br/como-atuamos.

²² Edmilson Schinelo, ‘O Rosto de CEBI – Coordinator’s Report to 21st National Assembly, 2017’, accessed 7 February 2020, <https://s3-sa-east-1.amazonaws.com/cebi.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/13114027/21a-Assemb-Síntese-das-respostas-dos-Estados1.pdf>, 4.

- ²³ Schinelo, 'O Rosto de CEBI', 4.
- ²⁴ William Lazareth and Nikos Nissiotis, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982).
- ²⁵ Schinelo, 'O Rosto de CEBI', 5.
- ²⁶ J. Severino Croatto, *Hermeneutica Biblica* (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1984), 58.
- ²⁷ Croatto, *Hermeneutica Biblica*, 75.
- ²⁸ Croatto, *Hermeneutica Biblica*, 47.
- ²⁹ Croatto, *Hermeneutica Biblica*, 53.
- ³⁰ Nathalie Lebon, 'Popular Feminism and Its Roots and Alliances', in *Rethinking Latin American Social Movements*, edited by Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Vanden and Marc Becker (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 147–65, at 152.
- ³¹ Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Vanden and Marc Becker, 'Introduction: New Directions in Latin American Social Movements', in *Rethinking Latin American Social Movements*, edited by Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Vanden and Marc Becker (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 1–17, at 8.
- ³² The work of Ivan Petrella presents a fuller discussion of the imaginary limits of liberation theology and the need for liberation theology to engage with contemporary discussions in social sciences, including *The Future of Liberation Theology* and his *Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic* (London: SCM Press, 2008). Other liberation theologians, for example Jung Mo Sung, *Teologia e Economia* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1994), Thia Cooper's *The Reemergence of Liberation Theologies* (London: Palgrave, 2013) and Mario Aguilar's *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2007), have made similar observations.
- ³³ Edmilson Schinelo is a Roman Catholic theologian. He studied theology at *Nossa Senhora da Assunção* in São Paulo and at *Escola Superior de Teologia* in São Leopoldo. He teaches at the Roman Catholic University of Dom Bosco, Brazil, and works with CEBI. Edmilson Schinelo, *The Bible and Popular Education* (São Paulo: CEBI, 2009), 14.
- ³⁴ Schinelo, *The Bible and Popular Education*, 22.
- ³⁵ Schinelo, *The Bible and Popular Education*, 12.
- ³⁶ Schinelo, *The Bible and Popular Education*, 23.
- ³⁷ Maria Soave is a popular educator and biblical scholar. Italian by birth, she moved to Brazil at the age of 23 as a lay missionary and has been involved in LPB and popular education.
- ³⁸ Maria Soave, 'A Facilitação no Processo de Leitura Popular da Bíblia', in *Leitura Popular da Bíblia: caminhos e orientações*, edited by Maria Soave, Thiago Valentim Pinto Andrade, João Jairo Oliveira de Carvalho and Múria Carrijo Viana (São Leopoldo: CEBI, 2016), 8–23, at 11.
- ³⁹ José Comblin was a Belgian priest who moved to Latin America in 1958. He is considered among the leading liberation theologians. He frequently returned to the topic of evangelisation and Christianisation of Latin America in his reflections. His fullest analysis of this theological problem is perhaps found in José Comblin, *Cristãos rumo ao século XXI: Nova caminhada da libertação* (São Paulo: Paulus, 1996).
- ⁴⁰ Enrique Dussel is a historian, philosopher and theologian. His philosophy of liberation, inspired by liberation theology, has marked an epistemological rupture for Latin American and has been influential in post-colonial studies alongside the work of Aníbal Quijano and Walter Mignolo. Ada María Isasi-Díaz was a *mujerista* theologian drawing on Hispanic women's experiences of God and proposing 'decolonial epistemological options' for Latin American theology and philosophy.
- ⁴¹ João Jairo Oliveira de Carvalho, 'Leitura Popular da Bíblia', in *Leitura Popular da Bíblia: caminhos e orientações*, edited by Maria Soave, Thiago Valentim Pinto Andrade, João Jairo Oliveira de Carvalho and Múria Carrijo Viana (São Leopoldo: CEBI, 2016), 38–51, at 43. João Jairo Oliveira de Carvalho participates in LPB in the north-east of Brazil. He has studied at *Escola Superior de Teologia*, São Leopoldo.
- ⁴² Oliveira de Carvalho, 'Leitura Popular da Bíblia', 45.
- ⁴³ Hans de Wit is a Dutch theologian and biblical scholar. He taught Old Testament at the *Comunidade Teológica Evangélica de Chile* for 10 years before returning to the Netherlands and being appointed professor at the Free University of Amsterdam. From 2007 to 2017 he held the Dom Helder Camara chair at the university.

⁴⁴ Nancy Pereira Cardoso is a Brazilian Methodist minister and biblical scholar. She studied Philosophy and Religious Studies at the Methodist Universities of Piracicaba and São Paulo, Brazil, completing her PhD under the supervision of Milton Schwantes. She has worked with the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) for many years and contributes regularly to scholarly journals and university programmes throughout Latin America. Hans de Wit, *En la Dispersión el Texto es Patria* (San José: Universidade Bíblica Latinoamericana, 2010), 275.

⁴⁵ De Wit, *En la Dispersión*, 275.

⁴⁶ Elsa Tamez, 'Women's Rereading of the Bible', in *With Passion and Compassion. Third World Women Doing Theology*, edited by Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 173–80.

⁴⁷ Soave, 'A Facilitação no Processo'.

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