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Robert Lassalle-Klein

Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley

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The Claim of the Crucified People  
on U.S. Theology and Ethics

Robert Lassalle-Klein  
Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley  
Graduate Theological Union

How do we talk about God after Auschwitz?  
you ask yourselves,  
over there, on the other side of the sea, in plenty.  
"How do we talk about God inside Auschwitz?"  
ask my friends here,  
laden with reason, weeping and blood,  
immersed in the daily deaths of millions.

—Pedro Casaldáliga

Among so many signs which always exist, some calling for attention  
and others barely perceptible, there is in every time one which is the  
principle one, by whose light the other should be discerned and interpreted.  
This sign is always the historically crucified people, which joins  
to its permanence the always distinctive historical form of its crucifixion.

—Ignacio Ellacuría

This essay will address the claim of the historical reality of the crucified people  
of El Salvador on theology and ethics as it is done in the United States.  
In part one I will explain the idea of the crucified people,  
grounding the concept in the historical reality of the crucified people  
of El Mozote, El Salvador, and interpreting its meaning with reference  
to a governing theological concept: the reign of God. The entire discussion  
will be offered as a soteriological narrative exemplifying a remarkalbe and profound overarching horizon of Christian historical realism. In part two I will develop an outline of a formal philosophical and theological concept of the Christian historical realism that has produced this important new concept of the crucified peoples. It will use the concept of Christian historical realism to interpret the important claims which the crucified people place on U.S. theology and ethics.

Part One:  
The Historical Reality of the Crucified People and the Reign of God

THE HISTORICAL REALITY OF THE CRUCIFIED PEOPLE

In 1978 Ignacio Ellacuría introduced a new idea for theology, spiritualty and ethics in his essay “The Crucified People: An Essay in Historical Soteriology.” He turns to the figure of the suffering servant from Second Isaiah “on which the primitive Christian community fastened in order to understand Jesus’ death.” And he argues “this entitles us” to use the image to offer a christological interpretation not only of “the death of Jesus,” but of the “crucified people,” which he defines as that “vast portion of humankind, which is literally and actually crucified by natural, . . . historical, and personal oppressions.” Ellacuría also reminds us of the disturbing fact that their ongoing crucifixion has been a defining aspect of “the reality of the world in which the church has existed for almost two thousand years, [literally] since Jesus announced the approach of the Reign of God.”

This image of the crucified people now appears in various forms in theological writings from throughout the Third World. John Waliggo, writing an “African Christology in a Situation of Suffering,” asks, “Who is Christ to the suffering people of Africa?” In his study of Ugandan seminarians he finds “informants stressed the Suffering Servant who experienced suffering and silently suffers with all his

1Ibid., 580.

2Ibid., 164.

children.”  This leads him to criticize “classic christology,” which “tends to shy from relating to Christ’s death the daily deaths of men and women,” for failing “to draw out practical and concrete ways in which Christians can live and bear witness to this christology.”  Another African, Kwesi A. Dickson, criticizes Western theology for treating death as “an embarrassment to be passed over as quickly as possible.”  He is working to develop an African theology of the cross.

Writing from Seoul, Korea, Chung Hyun Kyung asserts that “the most prevailing image of Jesus among Asian women’s theological expressions is the image of the suffering servant,” asserting that “they are making meaning out of their suffering through the stories of Jesus’ life and death.”  She adds a critical note, asserting that Asian women are well aware that “making meaning out of suffering is a dangerous business . . . [which] can be both a seed for liberation and an opium for . . . oppression.”

Kosuke Koyama, originally from Japan and a leading figure in Asian Christian theology, draws attention to the fact that “the dominant reality of Asian suffering is that people are wasted: wasted by hunger, torture, deprivation of rights; wasted by economic exploitation, racial and ethnic discrimination, sexual suppression; wasted by loneliness, nonrelation, noncommunity.”  He quotes the Sixth Assembly of the Christian Conference of Asia (June 1977): “In this situation we begin by stating that people are not to be wasted, people are valuable, made in God’s image.”  And he argues, “If a person is starved, the living image of God is wasted. . . . The empty stomach means an insult to the image of God.”

Finally, describing “Jesus Christ in Popular Piety in the Philippines,” Salvador T. Martinez asks, “To a nation, 70 percent of whose people live in absolute poverty, constantly menaced by hunger and disease, by ignorance and fear, deprived of education and other basic rights, where is the gap between the poor and the rich?”  His answer is to describe how Filipinos have reappropriated and inculcated traditional images from the cultural world of their Christian colonizers in order to draw active analogies between their own situation of oppression and that of Jesus.

In Latin America, Jon Sobrino’s recent work is thoroughly shaped by what he calls the *analogatum princeps* between the deaths of Jesus and the “crucified people.”  His most recent christology, “written in the midst of crucifixion, but definitely in the hope of liberation,” argues that “liberation and crucifixion provide the basic tension for Christian faith and also the basic objective tension in christology on this continent.”  But he asserts that it is the power of the historical reality itself, which has turned the attention of Latin American liberation theology toward the crucified people.

In Latin America . . . both Christ and the continent are today crucified.  And their crosses . . . force one to think.  The relatively pacific “who do you say that I am?” becomes a pressing question in the mouth of the crucified Christ and of the crucified people . . . “Suffering precedes thinking,” said Feuerbach, but the suffering of the cross also forcibly produces thinking.  If the situation of crucified peoples—and of Christ in them—does not force us to think, one can ask what will, or what other thinking can be more necessary and urgent than this?

We turn for a moment, then, to gaze on the historical reality of a specific event of the crucifixion of the Salvadoran people.  We seek to locate our place in the drama at the foot of their cross.

The Historical Reality of the Crucified People of El Mozote and Our Place at the Foot of Their Cross

The events which occurred in the village of El Mozote, Morazan, on December 10 and 11, 1981, and the weeks following, form a heart-breaking microcosm of the historical reality of El Salvador’s crucified people and our place at the foot of their cross.  On March 15, 1993, the United Nations Commission on the Truth for El Salvador issued its report *From Madness to Hope: The Twelve-Year War in El Salvador*.  The report summarizes the brutal facts of the case:

On December 10, 1981, in the village of El Mozote . . . Morazan, [El Salvador] . . . the Atlacatl Battalion detained, without resistance, all the men, women and children who were in the place.  The following day,
December 11, . . . they were deliberately and systematically executed . . . over 200. The figure is higher . . . [with] unidentified victims. 19

The report provides heartbreaking detail of soldiers' savagery:

During the morning, they [the troops] proceeded to interrogate, torture and execute the men in various locations. Around noon, they began taking out the women in groups, separating them from their children and machine-gunning them. Finally they killed the children. A group of children who had been locked in the convent were machine-gunned through the windows. After exterminating the entire population, the soldiers set fire to the buildings. 20

The commissioners add that the massacre was planned with other military units as part of "Operation Rescue," 21 which proceeded for a period of days to carry out similar slaughters of women and children in the surrounding villages of La Joya, La Rancheria, Los Toriles, Jocote Amarillo, and Cerro Pando. They note the Armed Forces High Command of El Salvador then "repeatedly denied the massacre occurred" while its own chief of staff, who "was aware that the massacre had occurred, . . . failed to undertake any investigation." 22

The widely respected U.N. Truth Commission report then explicitly links these massacres to U.S. counterinsurgency policy. It explains that the Atlacatl Battalion was a Rapid Deployment Infantry Battalion (BIRI) "specially trained for 'counter-insurgency' warfare. It was the first unit of its kind in the armed forces and had [just] completed its training, under the supervision of United States military advisers, at the beginning of that year, 1981." 23 The report explicitly contradicts any impression that El Mozote might have been an aberration of military policy restricted to the early 1980s, noting that, almost a decade later in 1989, members of the very same battalion carried out the murders of six Jesuits and two women at the University of Central America.

A 1991 report prepared by the Rand Corporation for the Pentagon 24 is even more insistent on these points.

25FMLN is an acronym for the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation. It was officially formed on October 19, 1968, when several of the most important political-military organizations working to overthrow the government of El Salvador united under its banner. In 1970 the first of what would become the five political-military organizations constituting the FMLN was founded when Salvador Cayetano Carpio resigned from the Communist Party of El Salvador (PCS), went underground, and founded the Popular Forces of Liberation (PFL). In 1972 the Revolutionary Army of the People (ERP) also emerged from the Communist Party with a different, younger, and more diverse constituency. In 1975 the Armed Forces of the National Resistance (FARN) was formed by a group which left the ERP when a hard line faction assassinated Roque Dalton, El Salvador's most important living poet (then a member of the ERP), ostensibly because of his insistence on the need to emphasize political as well as military revolutionary activities. The following year, on January 26, 1976, the Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers (FRTC) was founded during a congress of union workers, individuals who had left the group which founded the ERP in 1972, and others. Finally, in 1979, the PCS itself formed the Armed Forces of Liberation (FAL). 26

26Schwartz, American Counterinsurgency, 35-36.


28Schwartz, American Counterinsurgency, 1.
least $4.5 billion, over $1 billion of which is in military aid. When combined with over $850 million in unsubsidized credits and an estimated CIA investment of over $500 million, the total expenditure approaches $6 billion. Only five countries receive more American aid each year than El Salvador, a nation of 5.3 million people.25

This background, then, allows us to locate ourselves at the foot of the cross of the crucified children of El Mozote. In 1993 the U.N. Truth Commission would report that in the convent "143 bodies were identified, including 131 children under the age of 12 [whose] . . . average age . . . was . . . six." The report documents that they had all been murdered with "United States-manufactured M-16 rifles" firing ammunition "manufactured for the United States Government at Lake City, Missouri."26 If nothing else, these facts should leave U.S. citizens wondering about the claim of the historical reality of the crucified people of El Salvador on theology and ethics as it is done in this country.

Jon Sobrino on the Historical Reality of the Crucified People and the Kingdom of God

The Crucified People: A Horrifying Fact

In "The Crucified People: Yahweh's Suffering Servant Today," a 1992 essay written for the five hundred year anniversary of the arrival of the Spanish in the Americas, Jon Sobrino claims a most appropriate "starting point for talking about the crucified peoples" (given the occasion). He asserts that when the historical reality of "the crucified peoples—shows us what we are, we tend to ignore it, cover it up, or distort it, because it simply terrifies us."27 Playing on the metaphor of the discovery of the Americas, he then proposes to "start by dis-covering the covered-up reality of our world."

He finds Ignacio Ellacuría's provocative phrase that "creation has turned out badly for God" confirmed by "horrifying" economic data: from 1971 to 1990 the number of Latin Americans living in poverty in-

27Sobrino, "Crucified Peoples," 49
28Ibid.
argues that "the Third World... presents an historical reality somehow analogous to that in which the very notion of a 'Kingdom of God' arose." Second, liberation theology's formal commitment to historical, prophetic, praxic, and popular values "can be formulated generically as [a commitment to] the Kingdom's 'transcendence in history.'" Accordingly, "Liberation theology... claims to have found in the Kingdom of God a totality from which it can deal with all theological subjects and also rank them in accordance with their closeness to the ultimate mystery, now formulated as [the] Kingdom of God." Third, this helps liberation theology practically to overcome the danger of "equating the Kingdom with the church," and it clarifies the "historical malice of the world" for the message of Jesus. Fourth, it makes sense christologically since it "retrieves the historical Jesus and... makes central the Kingdom that Jesus preached, while applying it to the historical present." Sobrino believes this methodological commitment, together with the historical reality of the crucified people, places several claims on Christian theology and ethics (especially those done from a liberation perspective) "for the obvious reason that the Kingdom did not come in Jesus' time, and the present requires that we set it in history." First, our place at the foot of the cross of suffering peoples generates the "basic task to establish, methodologically and systematically... the reality of the anti-Kingdom." This is necessary so that the "salvation brought by the Kingdom... will, then, be being saved in history from the evils of history." Second, liberation theology must take "absolutely seriously the question of who the Kingdom is for and reaffirm that it belongs to the poor." However, Sobrino also addresses the question of how the kingdom is "for" the non-poor as well. In the kingdom, the non-poor are evangelized by the poor, most especially when the non-poor assume a role of "real kenosis, of real service to and support of the materially poor, of sharing in and taking on the fate of the poor." Third, the historical reality of the crucified people "obliges us to make [the kingdom] present through historical mediations and to bring it about at all levels of historical reality," despite the fact that it "cannot ever be fully realized in history." And fourth, theology proclaims that only when "humankind becomes a single people and a true people in which relationships of justice and solidarity reign, then the Kingdom of God will have come." Martyrs for the Kingdom

This methodological approach, and the substantive claims placed on theology and ethics by the crucified peoples, then leads Sobrino to search for an analogatum principis between the innocent death of the "crucified people" and the martyrdom of Jesus. He turns first to the dissatisfaction expressed in one of Karl Rahner's last writings with the applicability of the usual understanding of martyrdom in dogmatics and fundamental theology (the "free and patient acceptance of death for the cause of the faith [including its moral teaching] in its totality, or with respect to a particular doctrine but with the totality of the faith always in view") to the situation of various Latin American martyrs. Rahner asks, "Why should not someone like Bishop Romero, who died while fighting for justice in society, a struggle he waged out of the depths of his concern as a Christian, why should he not be a martyr?"

This question bolsters Sobrino's claim that the role of questions of justice in the deaths of so many Latin American martyrs "have obliged theology to rethink its methodological approach to Christian martyrdom... through the death of Jesus." Consistent with the methodological principle enunciated above, Sobrino then follows the work of Leonardo Boff, who "begins his analysis of martyrdom starting from Jesus Christ the basic sacrament of martyrdom." He argues that martyrs should be considered as "martyrs of the kingdom of God" and that we should be able to interpret the meaning of their work in terms of its contribution to building the kingdom or defeating the anti-kingdom. The logic of this approach is grounded in a fundamental assertion of Sobrino's christology:

Jesus did not preach himself and did not come to bear witness to himself. He preached God's Kingdom and the God of the Kingdom, and bore witness to it with his life. So Jesus is also a witness and martyr for the Kingdom of God. And therefore, theologically, those who today bear witness with their lives to God's kingdom, like Jesus, are martyrs, and in them we find the analogatum principis of martyrdom.

\[\text{Ibid., 122.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 123.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 289, n. 31.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 123.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 125.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 126.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 128.}\]
Sobrino then identifies three “typical situations” in which the “crucified people” might legitimately be understood as the “martyred people.” There are those priests, nuns, catechists, delegates of the words, students, trade unionists, peasants, workers, teachers, journalists, doctors, lawyers, etc., who structurally reproduce the martyrdom of Jesus: “They defended the Kingdom and attacked the anti-Kingdom” with a prophetic voice “and were put to death.” There are those who die an ethical “soldier’s death,” defending the kingdom by open struggle using “some sort of violence.” He suggests that it is possible for them to “reproduce a central element of martyrdom: laying down one’s life for love.” So that they too could be considered to “share in martyrdom by analogy.”

Then

finally, there are the masses who are innocently and anonymously murdered, even though they have not used any explicit form of violence, even verbal. They do not actively lay down their lives to defend the faith, or even, directly, to defend God’s Kingdom. They are the peasants, children, women and old people, above all who died slowly day after day, and die violently with incredible cruelty and totally unprotected.63

These words describe many who died innocently at El Mozote in 1981. Sobrino suggests that “in order to be able to call them martyrs... we must give deep thought to what is martyrdom’s *analogatum principis*, and think about it looking at the cross of Jesus.”

What Sobrino finds is not so much “the active character of the struggle against the anti-Kingdom,” or a free choice to undertake such a struggle. Rather, he finds “In comparison with Jesus’ death, the deaths of these murdered masses... illustrate... historical innocence—because they have done nothing to deserve death except to be poor—and vulnerability—because they are not even physically capable of avoiding it.” This aspect of their suffering transforms it into a call to conversion and repentance, “for their deaths make clear that it is these masses who are unjustly burdened with a sin which has been annihilating them. ... These masses, who are oppressed during their lives and die in massacres, are those who illustrate best the vast suffering of the world.”64 This leads Sobrino to the conclusion that, “if we consider martyrdom in terms of the anti-Kingdom’s response to those who struggle actively for the Kingdom, the *analogatum principis* of the martyr is that exemplified by Archbishop Romero.” However, “If we consider it in terms of really bearing the sin of the anti-Kingdom, the *analogatum principis* becomes the unprotected masses, who are put to death in huge numbers innocently and anonymously.” He concludes with the deeply christological assertion that “they are the ones who most abundantly and cruelly ‘fill up in their flesh’ what is lacking in Christ’s passion. They are the Suffering Servant and they are the crucified Christ today.”65

### The Crucified People: Bearers of Salvation

What exactly is the salvation that the crucified people bring? Sobrino warns his reader that accepting that God chooses the crucified people “and makes them the principal means of salvation” will turn out to be “as scandalous as accepting God’s choice of the Servant and the crucified Christ to bring salvation.”66 He then concretizes this by suggesting four ways in which the crucified peoples bring salvation.

First, they are killed for the salvific act of establishing right and justice, which they do simply by having made a place for their families and communities in a world which is actively hostile to their very existence.67 By having struggled to live under difficult circumstances, they have made it possible for their children, siblings, or parents to continue to struggle for life. Second, the biblical revelation that they have been chosen by God “as bringers of salvation” transforms the scandal of their suffering into a powerful religious force for the very necessary “struggle for justice and liberation.”68 Third, their suffering reveals that the affirmation that “Jesus ‘died for our sins,’” a fundamental statement in the New Testament, means really “to be crushed on a particular historical occasion—by sinners.” And it shows that “what should be done about sin, another fundamental question in the New Testament... is clear; eradicate it... by bearing it.”

Fourth, the crucified people are a “light to the nations.”69 Here Sobrino makes the powerful argument that “the mere existence of the crucified people is what can—and in the last resort the only thing that

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63 Ibid., 269.
64 Ibid., 270.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 258. Sobrino links this trait to “prophets, priests and bishops, nuns and catechists, peasants and workers, students and lecturers... trying to establish right and justice,” and leaves out the poor who die “passively.” However, I am asserting that simply by supporting their families and neighbors who are persecuted, they are playing perhaps the most important possible role in the work to establish righteousness and justice.
68 Ibid., 260.
69 Ibid., 261.
can—unmask the lie by which this world’s reality is concealed. Imprisoning truth with injustice is the fundamental sin of human beings and also of nations.” For U.S. practitioners of theology and ethics still contemplating the crucified people of El Mozote, Sobrino’s interpretation (following Ellacuría) of what is positively revealed to us will be particularly disturbing. These innocent children, crucified with bullets manufactured for the United States Government at Lake City, Missouri, ”reveal that

the United States is much worse off than Latin America. Because the United States has a solution, but . . . it is a bad solution, both for it and for the world in general. On the other hand, in Latin America there are no solutions, only problems. But, however painful this may be, it is better to have problems than to have a bad solution for the future of history.”

Sobrino then suggests (again following Ellacuría) that the poor offer a substantive solution by embodying the possibilities of a “civilization of poverty” as opposed to the current “civilization of the western world, in all its capitalist and socialist forms.” This utopian idea is defined in terms of “all sharing austerely in the earth’s resources so that they can stretch to everybody.” He notes that this kind of “sharing achieves what the First World does not offer: fellowship and, with it, meaning of life.”

Finally, the crucified people live out “values that are not offered elsewhere.” Though it might be argued that “they generate these values because they have nothing else to hang on to,” their salvific importance should not be trivialized or discounted. Their lives offer “community against individualism, co-operation against selfishness, simplicity against opulence, and openness to transcendence against blatant positivism, so prevalent in the civilization of the western world.” The crucified people offer a stubborn hope in the possibilities of history, and continue to be able to manifest love in the face of a “structurally selfish world.” In truth, the survivors of El Mozote, like so many of the poor, have shown a willingness “to forgive their oppressors” and “open their arms and accept” those who come to share

what they have with them. Their suffering has generated real solidarity, which serves as “a model of how people and churches can relate to one another in a human and Christian way.” Amazingly, the continued belief of the crucified people in the compassion of God and the values of the kingdom “offer faith, a way of being church, and a more genuine, Christian, and relevant holiness for the world today.”

In the end, Sobrino says that while “it is necessary for us to speak of . . . crucified peoples,” in truth “the sole object of all this talk must be to bring them down from the cross.” Pressing the point, he reminds us that “coming to terms with” the historical reality of God’s presence with the crucified people, “has to be accompanied by ‘carrying’ the cross and taking responsibility for the crucified.” What I believe this means for us is that the crucified children of El Mozote place a claim on U.S. theology and ethics as it is done at the foot of their cross. It means that, at the hour to truth, unless we profoundly accept the truth of the crucified peoples and the fundamental responsibility of successive empires for their crucifixion, we will miss the main fact. That is, that in this world there is still enormous sin. Sin is what killed the servant—the Son of God—and sin is what continues to kill God’s children. And this sin is inflicted by some upon others.

Citing the words of Ignacio Ellacuría, Sobrino suggests that when “confronted with the crucified people . . . other worlds can know their own truth from what they produce, as in an inverted mirror.” For Sobrino, the crucified people serve as the preeminent sign of our times to “verify . . . historically” both the terrifying grip of the reign of sin on our world and the salvation offered through God’s invitation to solidarity with the crucified peoples. If we are willing to learn anything from the crucifixion of our brothers and sisters at El Mozote, we should know that U.S. theology and ethics have not succeeded in untangling our active collaboration with the kingdoms of sin, from the saving compassion of the reign of God mediated to us through the crucified people of our world.

Part Two:
Christian Historical Realism and the Crucified People

Part one of this essay interpreted the concept of the crucified people by locating it within the larger theological concept of the king-
dom of God, and historicized it through the heartbreaking story of the crucified people of El Mozote, El Salvador. The following section will outline a formal philosophical and theological concept of the Christian historical realism that produced this important new concept of the crucified people. It will argue that Ignacio Ellacuria’s key concept of “historicization” (which also shapes the work of Jon Sobrino) is quite parallel to the pragmatic maxim of C. S. Peirce. And it will use this structure to substantiate the important claims being placed on crucified people on U.S. theology and ethics.

**Ellacuria’s Christian Historical Realism and the Concept of Historicization**

**Christian Historical Realism**
and Latin American Theological Method

Our discussion so far of the crucified people and the kingdom of God has been suffused with what I would call a profound Christian historical realism, embodied in the regular appeal to the idea of historical reality. The unique form of this realism is no accident, and it deserves our attention. We again pay the tax for the crucifixion of the children and adults of El Mozote (as we did in 1981) when we do not take seriously the claims of those whom they have adopted as their spokespersons, presuming they are not informed by sophisticated theory, or experiential referents which call for our attention. In this section we will look briefly at Ignacio Ellacuria’s formal (and deeply Christian) philosophy of historical reality. Ellacuria is considered by many to have developed the most important account of the crucial (and ubiquitous) Latin American notion of historical reality, so central to the theology of liberation, and the power of the concept of the crucified people.

In 1975 Ellacuria wrote one of his most important articles, appropriately entitled “Toward a Philosophical Foundation for Latin American Theological Method.”

He argues that liberation theology’s inherent historical realism distinguishes it philosophically from much of European theology. He begins summarizing four principles which the eminent Emerich Coreth develops from the philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Humbolt. Ellacuria suggests these foundations were currently held by many European/North American theologians as well: understanding has a circular structure which compromises the strength of its claims; understanding is basically the comprehension and description of the structures of human meaning; the “world” and the things which we take for granted as our “horizon” are human structures created for the communication and maintenance of meaning; and all knowledge, including theological knowledge, is basically a search for meaning. Surprisingly, however, Ellacuria treats these as philosophical presuppositions which “must be overcome” in order to “do justice . . . to the reality of human knowing and . . . Latin American theological thought.” This approach, and the alternative presuppositions he serves as a short introduction to Ellacuria’s understanding of historical realism and the unique importance he places on a philosophy of historical reality for grounding the claims of Latin American liberation theology.

Ellacuria proposes “three alternative fundamental principles for . . . [the] conceptualization of human understanding” as it operates in “Latin-American theological method.” First, “human intelligence is not only essentially and permanently sensible, but it is there from the beginning and fundamentally a biological activity.” He quotes Zubiri’s illustrative dictum that “a species of idiots is not biologically viable.” And he argues that intelligence never loses its character as an adaptive function, even in its most abstract or feeling-centered expressions. Second, he emphasizes that “the formal structure of intelligence . . . is not the understanding of being or the grasp meaning, but . . . apprehending reality and confronting oneself with that reality.”

Here, Ellacuria first develops the dictum that “confronting oneself with real things as real” involves three steps: first, getting to know reality; second, taking responsibility for doing something about that reality; third, actually transforming reality.

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Students of philosophy will recognize in this a direct attack on the Husserlian epoché which sought to bracket the question of reality (i.e., whether the objects of consciousness actually exist) from philosophy,41 while focusing on the "phenomenological" description of the human mind at work. In fact, it is Ellacuria's thesis that it is precisely the sub-ordination of the question of the real to that of meaning, or at least to the archaeological description of human consciousness creating meaning for itself (which informs Heidegger's work as well), which makes a fool of philosophy and theology in much of the First World today. He argues that, no matter what intellectuals may think,

Precisely because of the priority which reality has over meaning, there is no real change of meaning without a real change in reality; to try to change the first without trying to change the second[,] is to mislead the intelligence and its primary function. . . . To believe that by changing the interpretations of things that the things themselves change, or, at least, the profound consciousness of one's location in the world [would change], is a grave epistemological error and a profound ethical failure. Interpretive changes of meaning, and even purely objective analyses of social and historical realities, are not real changes. And neither are they even real changes of meaning itself, but usually changes in its formulations. However, this does not keep the intelligence from having an irreplaceable function, as a theoretical force, for the needed change in the technical and ethical orders of historical reality.42

This leads, then, to his third and final point: "Human intelligence is not only always historical, but this historicity belongs to the essential structure of intelligence."43

The full impact of this claim for Ellacuria's historical realism is impossible to grasp without relating it to Zubiri's debate with the European struggle to choose between the Aristotelian turn to nature (or various subsequent forms of naturalism), and the post-Kantian turn to the subject.44 Zubiri rejects both options with the claim that "neither


41In this connection Quentín Lauer argues that "this 'epoché' is clearly . . . derived from the Cartesian doubt, but Husserl is consistent in pointing out that it is essentially different: to doubt reality, be it only methodically, is to take a position with regard to reality, and this Husserl will not do; reality simply does not enter into the question of 'what' things are" (Phenomenology: Its Genesis and Prospect [New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958, 1965] 49).

42Ibid. 420.

43Ibid. 420.


the intrinsic priority of knowing over reality, nor of reality over knowing is possible. Knowing and reality are strictly and rigorously of the same genus in their root."45 Antonio González notes that, according to Ellacuria, this assertion "means that one has gone beyond both the horizons of Hellenistic naturalism, and modern subjectivism . . . [to] a new horizon."46

What exactly is this new horizon which Ellacuria believes places Latin American theology outside the ambit of European philosophy? In his Dynamic Structure of Reality,47 first offered as a course and then published posthumously in 1989, Ellacuria's philosophical mentor, Xavier Zubiri, provides an answer. Zubiri analyzes matter, biological life, the human person, society, and the dynamic structure of history as subsystems of a more comprehensive reality (the cosmos). He argues that, like all the subsystems of reality, history is reciprocally interactive with the others. But it is also inclusive of the others as the summa of reality. We can see the implications of this approach in the difference between Heidegger's definition of humanity as a "rational animal" (emphasizing the gap that separates human rationality from animal nature) and Zubiri's description of humanity as the "animal of realities."48 (emphasizing the strict historical unity of intelligence and reality).

This follows from Zubiri's metaphysical approach to historical reality, in which human rationality simultaneously depends upon, integrates, and adds something new to animal nature. And it is reflected in Zubiri's notion that human history is at once part of, and adds a novum (something really new) to, reality itself.

What does human history add to reality? For Ellacuria, it adds praxis, understood as a new level of reality (historical reality). History evolves from, incorporates, and transforms (within limits) all of reality's other aspects (including the systemic and material properties of matter, biological life, sentient life, and human life). It also adds the content of history itself. In both cases, "Praxis is identified with the historical process itself, in as much as this process is productive and transformative"49 both of previous history and of nature.

It is important to notice here that Ellacuria's treatment of history as a systemic dimension of reality allows him to speak of a philosophy of
“historical reality.” Indeed, he treats historical reality as a metaphysical category. This background, then, helps us to understand that in the 1975 article Ellacuria is arguing from the premise that historicity belongs not only to the “essential structure of intelligence,” but to the essential structure of reality itself (historical reality)! Accordingly, Ellacuria presents Aristotle’s classic distinction between the operations of human knowing in *theoria*, *praxis*, and *poiesis*, as representing “three aspects” of how historical reality and intelligence interact in the historicity of human knowing. This implies that, whether theology is operating in the mode of interpretive *theoria*, ethical *praxis*, or technically constructive *poiesis*, it must pay attention to the interaction of historical reality and intelligence in its work. Returning to our example, this means that the sacred sciences should function as ways of knowing, taking responsibility for, and transforming the historical reality of the crucified people.

Methodologically, this leads Ellacuria to push theology: to free itself from the distortions which are created by historical patterns of seeking “recognition by academic . . . [or] revolutionary elites”; to develop methods which can ground truly Christian concepts like the people of God and revelation in the historical reality of Latin America; to develop proper relationships between its interpretive practices and the type of socio-historical commitments called for in the Gospel; and to make use of secular discourses from philosophy and the social sciences in order to better ground the work of theology in historical reality, while simultaneously being sure to guard against disfiguring “the purity and plenitude of the faith” when using these secular discourses.

*Christian Historical Realism and Soteriology*

Ellacuria’s 1975 article provides a synopsis of the implications for theological method which he drew from the philosophical formalization of his Christian historical realism. Almost a decade later, Ellacuria further elaborated a formalized concept of Christian historical realism in an important 1984 article, “The Historicity of Christian Salvation.” The article asks, “What do human efforts toward historical, even socio-political liberation have to do with the establishment of the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached?” It proceeds under the assumption that “the problem is primarily a problem of praxis. It is the problem of Christians who, compelled by their faith and as an objective realization of that faith, seek to make human action correspond as much as possible to God’s will [or the kingdom of God].”

Ellacuria then makes a crucial move, explaining that he will treat revelation and history as correlative realities. In fact, the article will assume that there are not two histories, a history of God and one of humanity, a sacred and a profane history. Rather there is a single historical reality in which both God and human beings intervene, so that God’s intervention does not occur without some form of human participation, and human intervention does not occur without God’s presence in some form.

Ellacuria argues that this assumption requires a “historicized” treatment of the concept of transcendence. Such an treatment rejects “pernicious philosophical influences” which have identified transcendence with “separateness,” and taught that “historical transcendence is separate from history.” He argues that these philosophies are united by their interpretation that “the transcendent must be outside or beyond what is immediately apprehended as real.” For them, the transcendent is always “other, different, . . . separated . . . in time, . . . space, or . . . essence” from the historical object. Instead, Ellacuria argues for a notion of transcendence as “something that transcends in [history] and not as something that transcends away from; as something that physically impels to more, but not by taking out of; as something that pushes forward, but at the same time retains.”

The value of this approach for a theological understanding of salvation history is that “when one reaches God historically . . . one does not abandon the human, does not abandon real history, but rather deepens one’s roots, making more present and effective what was already effectively present.” Here we see the deeply Christian implications of Ellacuria’s premise that neither intelligence (in this case, the idea of transcendence) nor historical reality (which includes the actual transcendence of God in history) can be placed above the other.

Ellacuria then draws a startling insight from this argument: “God can be separated from history, but history cannot be separated from God. Sin does not make God disappear, but rather crucifies God.” The idea here is that, no matter how much one might deny the idea of God, the saving presence of God continues to permeate historical reality. Of course, the radical denial of the historical reality of God will have real implications: crucifixion. But here the solidarity of Jesus and the martyrs—which accepts crucifixion as the price of love and solidarity, and has the resurrection as its completion and validation—become

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86 Ellacuria, “Hacia una fundamentacion,” 422.
tangible historical signs of transcendence and hope. Accordingly, Ellacuria refuses cosmic dualisms as the final explanation for the inhumanity of sin, asserting, “It may be possible to divide history into a history of sin and grace; but the division presupposes the real unity of history.” What this means, of course, is that we bear responsibility for our actions. And, more positively, we have a crucial role to play in historicizing the kingdom of God. Thus, it is Ellacuria’s profound Christian historical realism and his commitment to the unifying role of grace in history which lead him to assert that it is historical reality itself (which includes the reality of the kingdom as well as the anti-kingdom) which places a radical claim on the Christian disciple to take the crucified people down from the cross.

CHRISTIAN HISTORICAL REALISM, CRUCIFIED PEOPLE, AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Historicization

It is in the context of this profoundly Christian “historical realism” that Ellacuria develops his key concept of “historicization.” In what follows I will briefly suggest why I believe that Ignacio Ellacuria’s key concept of “historicization” (which also shapes the work of Jon Sobrino) is quite parallel to the pragmatic maxim of C. S. Peirce.

My reading of Ellacuria finds two primary uses of the term in his work. First, in the Philosophy of Historical Reality, Ellacuria uses the term historicization to refer to the incorporative and transformative power which human praxis exerts over the historical and natural dimensions of reality. On the one hand, “The historicization of nature consists . . . in the fact that humanity makes history from nature and with nature.”66 On the other, praxis appropriates from historical tradition its concepts, values, practices, and other ways of being in reality, simultaneously being shaped by and transforming them. In its primary sense, then, historicization refers to this process. However, in a 1976 article entitled “The Historicization of the Concept of Property as a Principle of Deideologization,” Ellacuria suggests that in a secondary sense, “Demonstrating the impact of certain concepts within a particular context is [also] . . . understood here as their historicization.”76 It is this secondary sense of the term (having to do with verifying the truth claims proceeding from the first meaning of the historicization of a concept) which predominates in the great majority of his occasional pieces, and on which we will focus here.77

Ellacuria makes several important claims in this piece which I would summarize under the following three theses. First, historicization is grounded in historical realism. Indeed, concepts are historicized “when they refer to historical realities.”78 Ellacuria notes that this is the opposite of being abstract (in the negative sense). Second, historicized concepts are subject to validity tests. Using a classic notion of counterfactual proof, Ellacuria argues that if a “hypothesis cannot be invalidated by data, it is not” historicized. Indeed, he suggests that, in this case, “one is falling into sheer idealism, no matter how much the realist or the materialist one might claim to be.” Third, historicization is a procedure for testing and validating truth claims associated with a concept. Ellacuria holds that the truth of a historicized concept lies in its “becoming reality,” such that its “truth can be measured in [its] results.”79 He then asserts that it is necessary to continually revise the content of a given concept in light of its historical effects, in order to maintain the “essential meaning” of that concept. Thus meaning is determined, at least in part, in terms of the practical effects of a concept.

One of Ellacuria’s last articles, published posthumously in 1990, offers a summary of how he developed this approach to historicization as a procedure for testing and validating truth claims during the last fourteen years of his life.80 Ellacuria begins by arguing that “it is indispensable to submit the concept of human rights to a ‘historicization.’” He also expresses the hope that “this ‘historicization’ will illumine the theory and . . . empower the praxis of human rights,” as Salvadorans try to decide “what to do with the ‘common’ good in a society which is not only divided but conflicted” both by war and “the unjust distribution of goods.”81

“It was to this latter project that Ellacuria, the public intellectual, dedicated most of his career. Indeed he produced three massive volumes containing hundreds of such articles, posthumously published and appropriately entitled Vinte anos de historia en el Salvador 1969-1989 (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1991). António González, his student who edited Filosofía de la realidad histórica, suggests that for Ellacuria, in the ‘historicization of concepts like property, human rights or the common good . . . the decisive thing for understanding their historicization . . . consists in . . . that their treatment is historical, that is, that it begins from the fact that they are linked to an historical praxis.”


66 Ellacuria, Filosofía de la realidad histórica, 169.

The article then explains that the historicization of the concept of human rights involves: the verification in praxis of whether the truth claims, justice claims, and legal claims associated with specific human rights are realized or not; the clarification of whether the right in question serves the majority or just a few; the identification of the historical structures necessary to make the right in question historically effective; the de-ideologization of theoretical discussions which misrepresent historical reality, or which legitimize distortions like oppression and slavery; and the prudential quantification of what constitutes an acceptable time table and degree for the realization of the rights in question.

While this article deserves its own extended treatment, for our purposes it suffices to note how it shows that, at the time of his death, Ellacuria had continued to develop the elements of historicization which appear in the article from the mid 1970s. Indeed, I would suggest that it shows that Ellacuria continued to understand historicization (at least in part) as a methodological procedure (a) grounded in historical realism, (b) subject to a wide range of validity testing, and (c) fundamentally designed to test truth claims. Additionally, it emblematizes the continued development of his keen interest in the real power of this procedure for determining the true meaning of a concept in an ideologically contested environment.

Pragmatism

It is hard to miss the profound parallels between Ellacuria’s procedure of historicization and the pragmatic method of C. S. Peirce. I will briefly comment on these parallels in order to adapt my own appropriation of Ellacuria’s Christian historical realism to the semiotic dimensions of the task at hand: that of explaining the startling claim that the crucified children of El Mozote are the symbol par excellence of the historical reality of the kingdom of God.

These comments will be guided by the insight that Peirce regarded pragmatism (just as Ellacuria regarded historicization) as a methodological procedure “which is guided by constantly holding in view . . . the purpose of the ideas it analyzes.”103 In what follows, I will briefly trace some significant parallels between Peirce’s pragmatic method and Ellacuria’s method of historicization (the secondary sense of the term outlined above) in regards to the three factors identified above.

102 Ibid., 596.

104 Ibid., 5:553ff.
105 For an elegant explanation of this relationship see John E. Smith, Purpose and Thought: The Meaning of Pragmatism (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1978) 51.
106 Ellacuria, Filosofía de la realidad histórica, 42.
107 Peirce, Collected Papers, 1:538.
We have seen that for Ellacuria “the formal structure of intelligence . . . is not the understanding of being or the grasp meaning, but . . . apprehending reality and confronting oneself with that reality.” This also involves a triadic relationship which I would suggest can be considered in some ways as analogous to (though significantly different from) that described by Peirce. The first two elements of Ellacuria’s schema—getting to know reality and taking responsibility for doing something about that reality—parallel his steps of apprehending and confronting oneself with reality. He also adds a third element, actually transforming reality. This is based on the assumption that praxis, including its signifying and conceptualizing aspects, is actually “identified with the historical process itself.”

Working analogically with this material, we might say that Ellacuria’s activities of getting to know, taking responsibility for, and transforming reality could be understood to function as signs or symbolic actions which “stand . . . to somebody for something,” and “create in the . . . [historical reality] of that person [or persons] an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign” (understood as a new praxis). The idea here is that when a new praxis is elicited as a response to an original praxis of getting to know and taking responsibility for historical reality, some transformation in historical reality is produced. This response could be understood analogically as the interpretant. We see this reflected in Ellacuria’s efforts to historicize concepts like democracy and human rights in order to clarify their real meaning and to test truth claims associated with them by political leaders.

SUBJECT TO VALIDITY TESTING

Peirce, like Ellacuria, is also interested in the question of validity testing. For Peirce, the question of validity is determined by logic, which he understands as “the science of the general necessary laws of signs.” Peirce regards logic as simply “another name for semiotic . . . the quasi-necessary, or formal doctrine of signs” which governs “the theory of right reasoning,” determining “what reasoning ought to be.” Validity is not only a formal question for Peirce, however. His realism leads him to also treat logic as “the science of . . . true representation.” Peirce then develops his pragmatic method as the solution to the problem of verifying truth claims regarding the correspondence of a thought or sign with its object. Thus we see that, for Peirce, the pragmatic method is “a Maxim of Logic,” a “logical rule,” a “logical doctrine,” and a “theory of logical analysis, or true definition,” which grows out of his study of the formal laws of sign relation. But it is much more than that, for it carries him into the question of the verification of truth claims.

In this I find a more developed parallel to Ellacuria’s notion that historicized concepts are subject to validity tests. And we have seen that it is grounded in the distinction between truth and reality, exemplified in Ellacuria’s admonition that stubborn allegiance to a “hypothesis [which] cannot be invalidated by data” shows that “one is falling into sheer idealism, no matter how much the realist or the materialist . . . [they] might claim to be.” Most significant for our purposes, however, is that fact that the validity question cannot be treated apart from the role of historicization in establishing the relationship of truth to reality and the verification of truth claims.

DESIGNED FOR THE VERIFICATION OF TRUTH CLAIMS

Peirce’s pragmatic method is designed to discover the meaning of a concept and to test its truth claims. The essence of his formulation of the pragmatic method is best captured in his first formulation of the pragmatic maxim: “Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearing, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.” Peirce is working here with the triadic relationship between the sign (our conception), its object (that which the sign or concept refers to), and its interpretant (the effects we conceive the object of our conception to have). One way that Peirce explains the basic point is his idea that the meaning of a sign or concept may be said to “consist in how it might cause . . . [anyone or anything apprehending the sign] to act.” These actions or effects then serve as the interpretant of the real meaning of the original sign or concept. Our conception of them is considered to be equivalent to our understanding of the meaning of the original sign or concept.

But what if the real actions or effects we observe are different than those we originally predicted deductively from our conception? Peirce believes that clear and rational thought about something will formu-
late a hypothesis about the object, then use the hypothesis to predict
the object’s future actions under certain circumstances. The pragmatic
maxim, then, is designed to help us to determine the truth of the afore-
mentioned hypothesis (or idea) by creating a comparison between the pre-
dicted and the factual effects (or between the hypothetical meaning
and the actual meaning) of the sign or concept. One must then judge
whether the effects give evidence that the laws postulated in the original
hypothesis do, in fact, govern the reality of the object.

This is analogous to the way Ellacuria’s notion of historicization
works in providing a principle of verification for the truth claims of
a given concept. First, Ellacuria believes that the way a concept repre-
sents historical reality to specific persons or groups can serve several
purposes (ideological, truthful, legitimating, liberating, etc.). I find this
to be an excellent example of what Peirce means by a sign. Second,
Ellacuria’s notion that historicization is “demonstrating the impact of
certain concepts within a particular context” is parallel to Peirce’s idea
that in the pragmatic maxim that the interpretant of the meaning of a
sign could be said to “consist in how it might cause... [anyone or
anything apprehending the sign] to act.” Third, as I have already
suggested, his triadic notion that the role of the concept in entering,
taking responsibility for, and transforming historical reality is some-
what analogous to Peirce’s idea that a sign refers to an object for a sub-
ject in which it arouses another more developed sign, its interpretant.

As in any analogy, there are significant differences between the
work of these philosophers as well, though I do not have time to ex-
plain them here. Rather, my purpose is to briefly exploit the parallels
in their work in order to develop a hypothesis which treats the cruci-
fied people in the work of Ellacuria and Sobrino as the interpretant of
the historicization of the kingdom of God. However, it is worth adding
that I would hope that the convergences between two of the most im-
portant philosophers of Latin and North America would contribute to
the framework of future North-South dialogues in the Americas.

The Crucified People Are the Sign of the
Historicization of the Kingdom of God

I will rely on what I have just written to legitimate the following
adaptation of Ellacuria’s Christian historical realism to the semiotic di-
dimensions of an important task. In what follows I will conclude by try-
ing to historicize for U.S. theology and ethics the startling claim that
the crucified children of El Mozote are the symbol par excellence of the
historical reality of the kingdom of God.

Jon Sobrino has argued that “liberation theology... claims to
have found in the Kingdom of God a totality from which it can deal
with all theological subjects... rank[ing] them in accordance with
their closeness to the ultimate mystery, now formulated as [the] King-
dom of God.” Interpreting this semiotically, I would say that Sobrino
is arguing that the kingdom of God functions as the preeminent sign of
salvation on the continent. Elsewhere, Sobrino writes that, “in the last
analysis, what liberation theology says is that the Reign of God is to be
built in history... and that, in the light of faith, we see ourselves to
be on the road, as we accomplish this partial construction, to the de-
definitive Reign of God.” Here, following Peirce and Ellacuria, I would
argue that this amounts to saying that the object of the reign of God is
historical reality. This implies, then, that the goal of Christian disciple-
ship is the realization (or historicization) of the reign of God in histori-
ical reality. If these assertions are true, then one is forced to ask the truth
question in reference to reality: Does the concept of the reign of God
preached by Jesus and the church actually correspond to historical re-
ality as we have it?

This question, which has challenged the faith of Jesus’ followers in
various forms since his crucifixion, must be confronted. For those of us
here I ask, what is the meaning of this reign of God, initiated by Jesus,
in light of the helpless screams for mercy of the innocent children of El
Mozote? Our hearts are broken again when, reminded by Church
teaching and the example of the saints, we realize they are our chil-
dren, and we are their parents. We are horrified by the historical real-
ity that our taxes and our bullets make us their executioners, even as
they cry to us for mercy.

The logic of the images we have explored in this essay leads us to
the conclusion that the crucified peoples themselves must finally in-
terpret the meaning of the kingdom of God for us. But this is too much
for us! How can the meaning of the reign be revealed by the intentional
crucifixion of so many children? Here we turn again to the words of
Ignacio Ellacuria: “God can be separated from history, but history can-
not be separated from God. Sin does not make God disappear [from
history], but rather crucifies God” in history. This startling insight

107 Sobrino, Jesus the Liberator, 289, n. 31.

lacuria and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993) 277. Published in
Spanish as “Centralidad del reino de Dios en la teología de la liberación,” Mys-
terium Liberationis: Conceptos Fundamentales de la Teología de la Liberación (Madrid:

109 Ibid., 255.
brings us up against the reality that it is our sin (at least in part) which brought about the crucifixion of the innocents of El Mozote. Can we deny this? What salvation is there in such a terrible conclusion?

We were warned that opening our hearts to the cries for mercy of the crucified people as God’s offer of salvation would turn out to be “as scandalous as accepting God’s choice of the Servant, and the crucified Christ[,] to bring salvation.” 128 But let us ask again, what salvation do they bring?

Sobrino suggested that they struggle tenaciously against all odds to feed, clothe, and nurture their children in a world structured to guarantee their starvation. Some find in them a stumbling block, others a call to conversion. They suffer for the sinful excess of our obsessions with “national security,” a growing GNP, international monetary policy, and counterinsurgency doctrine. Yet they are a “light to the nations” unmasking “the lie by which this world’s reality is concealed,” 129 revealing that “the United States has . . . a bad solution, both for it and for the world in general.” 130 They embody the possibilities of a paradoxical “civilization of poverty” which serves as perhaps the only real alternative to the current “civilization of capital, in all its capitalist and socialist forms.” 131 We recall that this odd utopia involves “all sharing austerely in the earth’s resources so that they can stretch to everybody.” And, finally, they cling to “values that are not offered elsewhere.” 132 Though Sobrino accepts the possibility that, in some cases, it may be “because they have nothing else to hang on to,” 133 he says the salvific importance of truly humanizing values should not be trivialized or discounted.

Is this salvation? Do our hearts burn within as we walk together on the road of our common history? Do we recognize him in the breaking of our bread with the starving? Or in the eucharist of solidarity evoked by their suffering? Can we ground this kind of faith in theological reasons? In the end, Sobrino says that while “it is necessary for us to speak of . . . crucified peoples,” he believes that “the sole object of all this talk must be to bring them down from the cross.” 134 Finally, the historical reality of the interconnectedness of our sins and their suffering should be enough to establish the claim of the crucified peoples on theology and ethics in the United States. However, our apprehension of and self-confrontation with their historical reality offers the possibility of formulating a positive and formal theological principle regarding the operation of grace and salvation in our world today: the efficacious impact on our hearts and minds of the hopes and dreams of the children of El Mozote, as well as the tragedy of their deaths, is the ultimate interpretant of the truth and meaning of the kingdom of God in our national reality today. In a world still in the grip of sin, where children are murdered with U.S. weaponry in the name of democracy, our embrace of the hopes and dreams of our crucified neighbors will be an exemplary historicization of grace and salvation.

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128 Ibid., 260.
129 Ibid., 261.
131 Sobrino, Jesus the Liberator, 262; Sobrino, “Crucified Peoples,” 54.
132 Sobrino, Jesus the Liberator, 263.
133 Ibid., 263.
134 Ibid., 49.