Marxism in the Emergence and Fragmentation of Liberationist Christianity in Argentina

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As in the rest of Latin America, Argentina in the 1960s saw the emergence of a revolutionary Christian movement. This phenomenon was most conspicuously evident in the Movement of Priests for the Third World (MSTM), an explicitly revolutionary organisation that existed between 1968 to 1973 and comprised over 500 priests at its peak.[1] The Catholic heritage and relation to MSTM members of some of the leadership of the *Montoneros*, the country's largest urban guerrilla group, was also an important part of the latter's political formation. And revolutionary Christianity also encompassed a broad array of other actors and groups, including both Catholics and Protestants, clergy and laity. Often referred to as liberation theology, with its founding moment perceived to be Gustavo Gutiérrez's landmark 1971 work, Michael Löwy has made clear that this phenomenon was more than merely a theology: it reflected pre-existing commitments among Christians to revolutionary change and to transform the Church, severing its ties with economic elites and serving the poor.[2] As such, Löwy proposed the term 'liberationist Christianity' as a wider concept that could incorporate 'both the religious culture and the social network, faith and praxis'.[3]

But how did such a movement emerge? Liberation theologians themselves have often stressed identification with an authentic Latin American prophetic tradition, allowed to flourish

[1] The best study of the MSTM remains José Pablo Martín, *El Movimiento de Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo. Un debate argentino* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Guadalupe, 1992).
[2] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, (London: SCM Press, 1974); Michael Löwy, *War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 33.
[3] *Ibid*, p. 33.

in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).[4] Scholarly studies have also emphasised the Council and related theological developments in Europe, as a 'spirit of renewal' opened up a 'process of dialogue and discernment' with new modern and global secular realities.[5] While those who point to Vatican II's influence highlight religious *changes*, other students of Argentine history have discerned certain *continuities* with traditionalist Catholic tendencies.[6] In this view, liberationist Christianity, like previous iterations of integral Catholicism, was animated by an opposition to liberal capitalism – what Löwy identified as a 'negative affinity' between 'the Catholic ethic and capitalism'.[7] This, it is argued, was channelled through institutional structures such as Catholic Action and its specialised youth wings originally built to expand the Church's influence and combat liberalism and Communism, organisations that formed a generation of Catholic militancy.[8]

Without denying these as causal factors, this article revises our understanding of Argentine liberationist Christianity by highlighting the changes occurring within Marxism and the wider Left, both internationally and domestically. In so doing, it avoids reducing liberationist Christianity and its relationship to Marxism to internal developments of the Catholic Church. Even Löwy, the most insightful analyst on this relationship, at times identified the dialogue as merely '*an internal development of the church itself, stemming from its own tradition and culture'*.[9] In later works, Löwy recognised that 'Marxism, too, evolved

[4] Enrique Dussel, *History and the Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Perspective* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1976).
[5] John T. Deiner, 'Radicalism in the Argentine Catholic Church', *Government and Opposition*, 10:1 (1975); Gustavo Morello, 'El Concilio Vaticano II y su impacto en América Latina: a 40 años de un cambio en los paradigmas en el catolicismo', *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales*, 49:199 (2007), pp. 81-104.
[6] Carlos Altamirano, *Peronismo y cultura de izquierda* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2013); Beatriz Sarlo, *La batalla de ideas, 1943-1973* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2007), pp. 71-84. For a useful historical account, see Michael Burdick, *For God and the Fatherland: Religion and Politics in Argentina* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995).
[7] Löwy, *War of Gods*, p. 22. On integral Catholicism.
[8] Luis Miguel Donatello, 'Catolicismo liberacionista y política en la Argentina: de la política insurreccional en los setenta a la Resistencia al neoliberalismo en los noventa', *América Latina Hoy*, 41 (2005), pp. 77-97; Luis Miguel Donatello, *Catolicismo y Montoneros. Religión, política y desencanto* (Buenos Aires: Manantial, 2010).
[9] Michael Löwy and Claudia Pompan, 'Marxism and Christianity in Latin America', *Latin American Perspectives*, 20:4 (1993), p. 29. Emphasis in original.

in that period […] Marxism ceased to be a closed and rigid system subject to the ideological authority of Moscow, and became once again a pluralist culture, a dynamic form of thought open to various viewpoints and therefore accessible to a new Christian interpretation'.[10] This article builds on this latter argument, along with recent studies that have emphasised liberationist Christianity's diversity.[11] Marxism – itself a heterogeneous assemblage of ideas and groups – is identified here as one important influence, complicating analyses of the splits within liberationist Christianity in Argentina in the 1970s frequently understood merely in reference to divisions within the country's dominant popular movement, Peronism.[12]

Although it is impossible to summarise briefly the large body of literature on Marxism and liberation theology, a couple of important trends are evident. Scholars and commentators have often rebuked or defended liberation theology, according to the extent to which they consider that liberation theology can be categorised as Marxist.[13] Others have turned such an argument on its head, claiming that liberation theologians did not take the engagement with Marxism far enough.[14] In other words, a nuanced assessment of the historical role of Marxism, rather than polemical notions of infiltration or theoretical assessments of ideological affinity, is lacking from the existing literature. This article sets out such an historical view, highlighting the crises and changes within Marxism that enabled a controversial dialogue with Christianity mediated to some extent by Peronism, and the ways in which the ongoing ambivalent

[10] Löwy, *War of Gods*, p. 71. This echoes Enrique Dussel's argument in 'Encuentro de cristianos y marxistas en America Latina', *Cristianismo y Sociedad*, 74 (1982), pp. 19-36.
[11] Esteban Campos, '"Venceremos en un año o venceremos en diez, pero venceremos". La organización Descamisados: entre la Democracia Cristiana, el peronismo revolucionario y la lucha armada', *PolHis*, 5:10 (2012), 133-145; and Claudia Touris, 'Neo-integralismo, denuncia profética y Revolución en la trayectoria del Movimiento de Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo', *Prismas*, 9 (2005), pp. 229-239.
[12] Michael Dodson, 'Priest and Peronism: Radical Clergy and Argentine Politics', *Latin American Perspectives*, 1:3 (1974), pp. 58-72; Marcelo Gabriel Magne, *Dios está con los pobres. Los sacerdotes del tercer mundo* (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2004).
[13] Among opponents, the claim that Marxists infiltrated the Church is present in Ronald Nash (ed.), *On Liberation Theology* (Milford: Mott Media, 1984); Carlos Sacheri, *La Iglesia clandestina* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Cruzamante, 1970). Alternatively, some scholars somewhat downplayed the Marxist influence: Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology: The Essential Facts about the Revolutionary Movement in Latin American and Beyond* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1987); Arthur McGovern, *Liberation Theology and its Critics: Towards an Assessment* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1989).
[14] Alistair Kee, *Marxism and the Failure of Liberation Theology* (London: SCM, 1990).

relationship materialised within liberationist Christianity's principal referent in Argentina, the MSTM. Marxism is thus understood here not merely as a passive repository of ideas that Christians could draw from during a process of radicalisation, but as an active, dynamic and changing agent in the development and fragmentation of liberationist Christianity. Firstly, I point to the development of humanist Marxism, which discovered a common language with certain Christian sectors and a substantive rapprochement was reached by the mid-1960s. As Oscar Terán argues in his classic study of the Argentine New Left, Christians who 'drew closer to Marxism shared a theoretical point that enabled the passage from their own intellectual origins – existentialism, Christianity – towards Marxist positions: "humanism", that is, the modern concept of the subject as the bearer and arbiter of their own meanings and practices'.[15] Subsequently, I note the role of dependency theory, elaborated partly as a critique of the Communist Party's line that a bourgeois-democratic revolution was necessary before socialism was possible, the effect of the Cuban Revolution, the development of left nationalist sectors and a project shared by left and Christian sectors to re-engage with the Peronist popular classes. Finally, I show certain important ways in which this Marxist-Christian rapprochement featured in liberationist Christianity through the magazine *Cristianismo y Revolución* and the MSTM. In order to draw out the ambivalence characterising this relationship, I analyse the latter's fragmentation in the mid-1970s, arguing that the latter's three main political tendencies can be understood not only in reference to Peronism but also in relation to differing relationships with Marxism.

[15] Oscar Terán, *Nuestros años sesentas. La formación de la nueva izquierda intellectual en la Argentina, 1956-1966* (Buenos Aires: Puntosur, 1991), p. 111.

In the 1950s and 1960s, ruptures and transformations tore through Marxism globally, reconfiguring the revolutionary Left. The process of de-Stalinisation engendered splits within Communism, while new movements and networks began to reject the perceived rigidity and ineffectiveness of established left forces. Immanuel Wallerstein argued that a global inflection point for the left occurred in 1968, as a new radicalism represented both 'a *cris de coeur* against the evils of the world-system and a fundamental questioning of the strategy of the old left'.[16] Eric Zolov and Jeffrey Gould, meanwhile, have shown how a diverse New Left emerged across Latin America, as mobilisations of students, guerrillas, industrial workers, intellectuals, peasants and others challenged political systems throughout the continent.[17]

Although 1968 was certainly a crucial year, María Cristina Tortti noted that in Argentina the New Left can be identified much earlier. Following the military overthrow of Juan Perón's populist government in 1955, the Argentine Communist Party had hoped for a broad democratisation of political life and a thorough de-Peronisation of the working class.[18] The Party clung to the so-called National and Democratic Front strategy, emphasising the need for a bourgeois-democratic stage before any socialist revolution.[19] With the continued failure to displace Peronism as the hegemonic working-class identity and the dramatic victory of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, criticisms of the Communist Party increasingly came from the Left, adding to rebukes from nationalist and Peronist forces.[20] In the first half of the 1960s, there

[16] Giovanni Arrighi, Terence K. Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Antisystemic Movements* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 101.
[17] Jeffery Gould, 'Solidarity Under Siege: The Latin American Left, 1968', *American Historical Review*, 114:2 (2009), pp. 348-375; Eric Zolov, 'Expanding our Conceptual Horizons: The Shift from an Old to a New Left in Latin America', *A Contracorriente* 5:2 (2008), pp. 47-73.
[18] María Cristina Tortti, 'Izquierda y "nueva izquierda" en la Argentina. El caso del Partido Comunista', *Sociohistórica*, 6 (1999), pp. 223-226.
[19] This position held that colonial, semi-colonial and dependent countries must first democratise public life and overcome pre-capitalist economic forms and foreign imperialism for socialist change to be possible.
[20] María Cristina Tortti, 'La nueva izquierda a principios de los '60: socialistas y comunistas en la revista Ché', *Estudios sociales*, 22-23 (2002), pp. 145-162.

occurred ‘a series of internal splits inside the pro-Moscow Communist Party, resulting in the emergence of an ideologically ecumenical New Left comprising dissident splinter parties, armed formations, and cultural groups’.[21] Breakaway networks such as *Pasado y Presente* embarked on often erratic political trajectories, flitting between *foquista* guerrilla strategies, Maoism and Peronism.[22] Other organisations such as the Socialist Party, which under more liberal leaders like Américo Ghioldi consistently opposed Peronism and vigorously supported the so-called Liberating Revolution of 1955, experienced parallel processes of dissidence, fragmentation and radicalisation of some factions, often moving towards nationalist and Peronist positions.[23] What, according to Tortti, connected the heterogenous and disparate New Left, was ‘a shared language and a common political style’ and converging ‘criticisms of the “system”’.[24]

The intellectual climate of the New Left included varying Marxist perspectives that eschewed the official dialectical materialist philosophy of Stalinism. Many Christians, including leading liberation theologian José Míguez Bonino, observed with keen interest a humanist turn and considered it to enable a rapprochement:

> as Stalin’s star fell and the gates of criticism were opened, a humanist spring swept over Marxism. Economic analysis found again its place in the perspective of the humanist programme of the early Marx. On the basis of their common concern for man, Christians and Marxists began to move, in Europe, “from anathema to dialogue”.[25]

[21] Anna Popovitch, ‘Althusserianism and the Political Culture of the Argentine New Left’, *Latin American Research Review*, 49:1 (2014), p. 205.
[22] Daniel Gaido and Constanza Bosch Alessio, ‘“A Strange Mixture of Guevara and Togliatti”: José María Aricó and the Pasado y Presente Group in Argentina’, *Historical Materialism*, 22:3-4 (2014), pp. 217-250.
[23] María Cristina Tortti ‘La renovación socialista, el tema del populismo y la nueva izquierda en os años sesenta’, *PolHis*, 5:10 (2012), pp. 110-121.
[24] Tortti, ‘Izquierda y “nueva izquierda”’, pp. 221-222.
[25] José Míguez Bonino, *Christians and Marxists: The Mutual Challenge to Revolution* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976), p. 82.

Part of this intellectual renewal was the circulation of Marx's Paris Manuscripts of 1844, discovered and published initially in the 1930s. These writings fed into humanist readings of Marx's philosophy, such as the Frankfurt School and the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, which despite important differences displayed a common concern for alienation in capitalist society. Some mounted challenges to the fetishisation of the scientific character of Marxist analysis, rejecting positivistic characterisations and the notion traditionally associated with Friedrich Engels of the dialectic as an external force. Sartre asserted, attempting to marry his political and ontological philosophies, that Marxism was 'a materialism from *within'*; the dialectic was not a natural law in which humans operate, but 'is revealed and established through human *praxis*'.[26] In other words, society and history should be understood through human activity, not the imposition of an external model. Such notions, which raised questions around voluntarism and the necessity of objective conditions to be met for socialist change to occur, were of course fiercely debated. And exchanges such as those between Sartre and Roger Garaudy, a leading French Communist intellectual who defended the model of dialectical materialism as natural law, were observed attentively on parts of the Argentine left, for instance in the pages of *Revista de la Liberación* in 1964.[27]

Humanist Marxists were less likely to see religion merely as a structural force of oppression or legitimisation of exploitation, but rather recognised Marx's ambivalent claims about religion that reflected real human experience, allowing for a more sympathetic consideration of Christianity that saw its capacity for revolt. And in fact important referents within this current certainly predated the 1960s. Ernst Bloch emphasised the emancipatory core of Christianity and saw in the messianism of Christian faith the direct descendent of the utopian Marxist views of revolution.[28] In Latin America, Peruvian intellectual, José Carlos Mariátegui,

[26] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 33.
[27] 'La dialéctica en cuestión: Garaudy polemize con Sartre', *Revista de la Liberación*, 1 (1963), pp. 8-14.
[28] Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of Exodus and the Kingdom* (London: Verso, 2009); *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

similarly insisted on the spirituality of the revolutionary message, indicating the secularisation of religious values: 'Religious motives have been displaced from heaven to earth. They are no longer divine; they are human and social'.[29] Erich Fromm from the 1940s began to reject some of the rationalist assumptions about faith and religious belief: previously, the struggle against religion was 'the expression of faith in man's reason and his ability to establish a social order governed by the principles of freedom, equality, and brotherliness. Today the lack of faith is the expression of profound confusion and despair'.[30] Above all, Fromm advocated a faith in humankind, which he saw 'expressed in religious terms in the Judeo-Christian religion'.[31]

In the early 1960s, a Spanish translation of the Paris Manuscripts, redacting out Marx's passages on economics (thus centring on alienation) and introduced by Fromm's essay, *Marx's Concept of Man*, was published and disseminated across Latin America.[32] The *Pasado y Presente* group accused him of falling foul of an idealist and 'ethical' thesis in which Marxism was reduced to a 'philosophy of protest'.[33] Nevertheless, Fromm's study was received favourably in many quarters. Indicative of its wide circulation and broad appeal in Argentina was the fact that it reached the top of the popular magazine *Primera Plana*'s bestsellers list in early 1963.[34] Fromm sought to recapture the humanistic, utopian and even spiritual character of Marx's thought, distorted, in his view, by economic determinism and the dominance of Russian Marxists: 'Marx's aim was that of the spiritual emancipation of man, of his liberation from the chains of economic determination, of restituting him in his human wholeness, of enabling him to find unity and harmony with his fellow man and with nature […] Marx's aim,

[29] José Carlos Mariátegui, 'El hombre y el mito', https://www.marxists.org/espanol/mariateg/oc/el_alma_matinal/paginas/el%20mito%20y%20el%20hombre.htm [accessed 26 May 2019]. While it should be noted here that Mariátegui pre-dated the circulation of Marx's 1844 writings, this does not undermine the point that the Manuscripts fed into pre-existing humanist currents.
[30] Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself: An Enquiry into the Psychology of Ethics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1949), p. 198.
[31] *Ibid.* p. 207.
[32] Oscar del Barco, 'Carlos Marx y los Manuscritos Económico-Filosóficos de 1844', *Pasado y Presente*, Apr.-June 1963, pp. 101-105.
[33] *Ibid.* pp. 103-104.
[34] 'Los best-sellers de la semana', *Primera Plana*, 12 Feb. 1963, p. 34.

socialism, based on his theory of man, is essentially prophetic Messianism in the language of the nineteenth century'.[35]

While a number of its leading thinkers were Europeans, humanism was also characteristic of a south-south dialogue in which the Cuban Revolution served as a powerful mobilising force for the upsurge in revolutionary movements across Latin America.[36] Not only did it introduce the notion of *castrismo* – that revolutionary goals should be pursued immediately – and energise emerging insurrectionary groups, but the revolutionary discourse of Cuba was suffused with humanist language, especially through the speeches and writings of Che Guevara. In the early 1960s, Guevara wrote that Cuba contributed three fundamental lessons for Latin American revolutionaries. The first and third of these, that popular forces could defeat a regular army and that the countryside was the site for armed struggle, later proved mistaken in the Argentine case, as rural campaigns were crushed in the 1960s and 1970s by the strength of the Argentine armed forces.[37] But the second lesson, that rather than passively waiting for the necessary objective conditions for a revolution an insurrection can create them, evoked the voluntarism underpinned by an understanding of the dialectic as a product of human praxis and not subject to external natural laws. In fact, the insistence on the significance of praxis was amplified in the Southern Cone urban guerrilla movement in what Richard Gillespie identified as a 'cult of action'.[38] According to Löwy, 'Che's humanism was no doubt Marxist, but his was an unorthodox type of Marxism which differed radically from the dogmas found in Soviet booklets or in the "structuralist" and "antihumanist" interpretations that emerged in Europe and Latin America in the mid-1960s'.[39] Such themes permeated the

[35] Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1961) https://www.marxists.org/archive/fromm/works/1961/man/ch01.htm [accessed 25 June 2019].
[36] Thomas C. Wright, *Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001).
[37] Ernesto Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Hawthorne, CA: BN Publishing, 2012), p. 1. Urban guerrillas were more successful in Argentina, but also ultimately failed.
[38] Richard Gillespie, 'A Critique of the Urban Guerrilla: Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil', *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 1:2 (1980), p. 42.
[39] Michael Löwy, 'Che's Revolutionary Humanism', *Monthly Review*, 49:5 (1997), https://monthlyreview.org/1997/10/01/che-revolutionary-humanism/ [accessed 7 June 2019].

Argentine and Latin American Left: 'Returning to the fore are themes of Marxian humanism, of its revolutionary ethic, of the role of myth in the construction of a national will, of man as producer of history, that run through the young Marx and reappear in the moments of revolutionary access'.[40]

Humanism was also a tendency associated with Christian sectors, especially important among student circles that had constituted one of the early spheres of resistance to Peronism. One group to articulate anti-Peronism from a humanist Christian position was the Humanist Students' League (LEH) at the start of the 1950s. Pluralism was one of the defining facets of the LEH's political discourse: 'Pluralism designates a civil society constituted heterogeneously according to diverse structures […] We struggle for that pluralist society that is denied to us by totalitarian and dictatorial regimes, those who make uniform consciousness and who deny freedom'.[41] Inspired by Jacques Maritain, who had generated something of a controversy during his 1936 visit to Buenos Aires when he publicly opposed the Francoist forces in the Spanish Civil War, these humanists integrated into a broad anti-fascist front alongside liberals and socialists.[42] Domestically, Argentine anti-fascism was initially directed against Peronism; however anti-Peronism would soon prove to be fragile ground for a popular front in the Cold War era.[43] Indeed, the *laica o libre* conflict from 1955 to 1958, partly a legacy of the traumatic Peronist experience, pitted Catholic humanists who demanded recognition for private Catholic university degrees against the Left who wanted to maintain state monopoly. Despite such differences, both built their arguments on anti-authoritarian sentiments: Catholic humanists

[40] José Aricó, 'Marxismo latinoamericano', in Norberto Bobbio, Nicola Matteucci and Gianfranco Pasquino (eds.), *Diccionario de política*, (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI), p. 956.
[41] LEH, *Humanismo y Universidad* (Buenos Aires: LEH, 1953).
[42] Andrés Bisso and Javier Guaimet, 'Cristianos antifascistas: ¿Un oxímoron para los socialistas?', *PolHis*, 7:13 (2014), pp. 227-233; Loris Zanatta, *Del estado liberal a la nación católica. Iglesia y Ejército en los orígenes del peronismo, 1930-1943* (Bernal: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2005), pp. 198-208; José Zanca, *Cristianos antifascistas. Conflictos en la cultura católica argentina* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2013).
[43] Curiously, Perón himself may have been influenced by Maritain's social thought (if not his political pluralism). Loris Zanatta, *Perón y el mito de la nación católica. Iglesia y Ejército en los origenes del peronismo (1943-1946)* (Sáenz Peña: EDUNTREF, 2013), pp. 146-150.

saw in private universities a space free from state impositions, while Marxists and the wider Left saw in Catholic universities a reformulated version of the clericalism that had been characteristic of Perón's early alliance with the Church. [44]

Catholic humanists also challenged what they perceived to be another institutional authoritarianism: the homogeneity for which the integralist Argentine episcopal hierarchy strived.[45] LEH's was a radical position in the religious context, claiming to inhabit a temporal sphere entirely independent from a single institutional spiritual authority: 'humanism is not in any way a movement with a confessional character. Its plane is not the religious, nor is its doctrine the truths of faith. It is consequently not committed to any church and it receives in its bosom believers from different confessions'.[46] Although the LEH made clear its opposition to 'communist humanism' and 'atheist existentialism', there were commonalities throughout the various existentialist philosophies: the ontological subject was the individual, and the fundamental problematic was its relation to freedom.[47] The LEH followed Maritain's optimistic estimation of the freedom of the individual: 'A person is a centre of liberty put before things, before the universe and before God himself'.[48] Moreover, in centring the God-individual relationship, the young humanists also affirmed the existential basis of autonomy from the Church institution: 'The dignity of man can only be founded in God, and only God can found the dignity of man'.[49] Such a direct relationship with God allowed for an understanding of Christian faith that did not strictly require the mediation of institutional Church structures. As José Zanca notes, humanism constructed 'a legitimacy autonomous from

[44] Zanca, *Los intelectuales católicos y el fin de la cristiandad, 1955-1966 (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006)*, p. 101.
[45] Juan Sebastián Califa, 'Los humanistas en la Universidad de Buenos Aires. Orígenes, desarrollo, radicalización política y acaso de una corriente estudiantil de peso. 1950-1966', *Conflicto Social*, 4:5 (2011), p. 61.
[46] LEH, *Humanismo y Universidad.*
[47] LEH, *Humanismo y Universidad.*
[48] Maritain cited in *Ibid.*
[49] *Ibid.*

the hierarchy to bring about a reinterpretation of the religious message'.[50] In later liberationist frameworks in the late 1960s and 1970s, a similar autonomy from hierarchical ecclesial institutions could be discerned in the liberationist iteration of *Pueblo de Dios* (People of God), inspired in Vatican II but also inflected with populist Peronist discourse.[51]

Within the ecumenical Protestant world, humanist perspectives were also developing and engaging with left-wing ideas. Richard Shaull, a North American missiologist, provided the theoretical basis of this political mobilisation, embracing the process of secularisation as a liberation from theological dogmatism and challenging the institutionalism of churches.[52] In Córdoba, Argentina, in July 1964 at an international meeting of Student Christian Movement leaders, a priority was set 'to boost the Christian presence in the revolutionary situation that this continent is experiencing'.[53] Argentine Protestants themselves were elaborating a discourse of humanisation connected with participation in revolutionary movements and national liberation. For Ricardo Chartier, a leading Argentine Methodist writer, humanisation was the process of liberation 'from everything that impedes his arrival to being a man in its full meaning, that impedes the enjoyment of "abundant life", that impedes knowledge of his true identity and dignity as a human being, son of God'.[54] In Latin America, this meant overcoming economic underdevelopment, social inequalities and poverty, and was made possible because of a new 'climate of social change and revolution'.[55] Indeed, this new attitude was itself liberating for Chartier: 'The attitude that sees the unjust and subhuman situation as intolerable,

[50] José Zanca, '¿Primos o hermanos? Nacionalismo, integralismo y humanismo cristiano en la Argentina de los años sesenta', *Amnis*, 11 (2012), http://journals.openedition.org/amnis/1656 [accessed 20 February 2020].
[51] Juan Eduardo Bonnin, *Génesis política del discurso religioso. 'Iglesia y communidad nacional' (1981) entre la dictadura y la democracia en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2012); Guillermo Fernández Beret, *El pueblo en la teología de la liberación: consecuencias de un concepto ambiguo para la eclesiología y la pastoral* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 1996).
[52] Angel Santiago-Vendrell, 'Richard Shaull and the Struggle for the Identity of the WSCF', *Studies in World Christianity*, 16.2 (2010), pp. 180–193.
[53] Cited in Néstor Raúl García, 'Realidad del mundo y responsabilidad de la Iglesia', *El Estandarte Evangélico*, Feb. 1965, p. 314.
[54] Ricardo Chartier, 'El cambio social y la humanización del hombre', *El Estandarte Evangélico*, June 1964, p. 54.
[55] *Ibid.* p. 54.

and the determination to alter radically that situation, now constitute humanising factors in themselves'.[56]

What was clear was that the Christian-Marxist dialogue occurred on a humanist discursive terrain, set within an ethic of protesting authoritarian and inhumane conditions. It was no coincidence that Catholic philosopher and theologian, Conrado Eggers Lan, identified commonalities between Marxism and Christianity centring on Marx's concern for subjective and concrete human experience. Eggers Lan asserted that Marxism represented a secular form of 'some of the most profound motivations' of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and noted a shared concern for challenging dichotomies: Marx's assertion of the separation of the worker from his or her human essence in alienated labour was identified with Christianity's conflict with Platonic dualism (the separation of body and soul).[57] Indeed, Eggers Lan countered the traditional Catholic rebuke of Marxism as sowing social division and hatred in its notion of class struggle, through explicit reference to this humanism: 'The dialectic of class struggle does not presuppose any hate or destruction, even if Marxists often take it in that way: it is not the struggle of man against man, but of man *for man and against the things* that alienate him'.[58]

Catholic-Marxist dialogue would reach a new level in October 1965, with a seminar organised by the University of Buenos Aires's Faculty of Philosophy and Literature, designed to initiate an encounter 'between all those equally concerned for the problem of man and his prospects'.[59] It is notable that the humanist tone resembled the language of similar dialogues in East and West Europe, spearheaded by French Communist Party intellectual Roger Garaudy and with the participation of renowned theologians such as Karl Rahner and J.B. Metz.[60] The

[56] *Ibid.* p. 55.
[57] Conrado Eggers Lan, 'Cristianismo y marxismo', *Correo de CEFYL*, Oct. 1962.
[58] *Ibid.* The reception of Eggers Lan's claims was not entirely positive among the Left and in fact sparked an acerbic debate with León Rozitchner, who accused him of substituting economic-historical analysis for a bourgeois metaphysics and representing establishment ideology.
[59] *Diálogo entre católicos y marxistas* (Buenos Aires, 1965), p. 7.
[60] For an interesting critical discussion, see Roland Boer, *Red Theology: On the Christian Communist Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 118-135.

event in Buenos Aires included four participants: Juan Rosales and Fernando Nadra setting out Marxist perspectives; and Carlos Mugica (later a key MSTM figure) and Guillermo Tedeschi articulating Catholic viewpoints. In each contribution was a common perception that Vatican II had paved the way for such a dialogue. Mugica, for his part, emphasised the Council's *aggiornamento*:

> The Church is experiencing times of renewal and increasingly feels the need to open up to men, of dialoguing with them […] Having already initiated the dialogue with other religions, the moment has arrived to do it also with non-believers, especially with those who like us Christians, want a new world in which there is true peace and justice for all men.[61]

Rosales welcomed Vatican II as 'the expression of that update of the Church, the struggle for a more realistic orientation' and a negation of 'theological anti-communism', which 'hides the true struggle that separates men of our time and tries to make us believe that the battle is between atheists and believers'.[62] The identification of the Council as a central motivating factor rested not only on a recognition that it had initiated a dialogue, but also pointed towards some degree of common endeavour: a convergence between broadly articulated humanist and pluralist outlooks. Tedeschi emphasised his own humanism as permitting the rationalisation of 'a more just structure of society for man. It is evident that the unfolding of history and the social forces makes the working class the substantial element of that process, but it is also evident that that future socialist-personalist society must be pluralist and democratic'.[63] Rosales, meanwhile, cited approvingly the French personalist, Jean Lacroix, in his assertion that true dialogue must, 'even when they disagree in their philosophical premises, have a *common point of departure*: the world of men, their anxieties and aspirations, those that

[61] Mugica, in *Ibid.* pp. 23-24.
[62] Rosales, in *Ibid.* p. 12 and 11.
[63] Tedeschi, in *Ibid.* p. 57.

manifest equal concern for human solidarity'.[64] Two features, therefore, united the participants: firstly, a common ethical language of reflection over the individual's place in society and the world at a given historical moment; and secondly, a mutual recognition of plural political and philosophical worlds, and the affirmation that despite fundamental philosophical differences, commonalities existed in the search for a more human society.

Philosophical engagement provided something of a foundation for a more political rapprochement. This occurred across the continent in the guise of a variety of groups and figureheads, such as Camilo Torres, the Colombian guerrilla-priest who had promoted Christian-Marxist dialogue throughout the 1960s and was gunned down in 1966 as a member of the National Liberation Army. Left-wing activists breaking away from what they perceived as stale schemas of traditional Left parties, and Christian militants distancing themselves from the rigid integralism of the ecclesial institution, converged in eschewing institutional authoritarianism but also in affirming the need for radical political action in a social setting seen as radically dehumanising. In Argentina, the Christian Democratic youth movement (JDC), whose membership was drawn largely from groups such as the LEH and the traditionally conservative Catholic Action, under Norberto Habegger and Domingo Razzoti's leadership in 1964 began to assume an incipient revolutionary critique of capitalism: 'The structural change will affect the socio-economic regime, which means, for example, a deep transformation of the current private property system'.[65] In the proposition of a new society, they distanced themselves from the integralist project of establishing a Christian social order: 'In the new order an IDEOLOGY of Christian inspiration must be embodied. Here it should be clarified that we do not refer to the imposition of a "Christian order" […] *What we propose is an order in which man can develop completely, in all his material and transcendental*

[64] Rosales, in *Ibid.* pp. 9-10.
[65] JDC, 'Movimiento Nacional de la Juventud Demócrata Cristiana Argentina', in Flora Castro and Ernesto Salas (eds.), *Norberto Habegger: Cristiano, Descamisado, Montonero* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 2011), pp. 101-129.

dimensions'.[66] Despite remaining wary of Marxism's 'essentially materialist and profoundly atheist character', the JDC indicated a sense of common aspiration with the Church's historical adversaries: 'We are disposed to recognise authentic Christian values wherever they may be found; in this way, in general terms, we can work together with Marxists, if circumstances permit'.[67] In these proclamations, a positive affinity between a loosely Marxist critique of private property, the humanist denunciation of alienating contemporary structures and the Christian demand for integral development began to crystallise. It is certainly true that Christians could draw from a longstanding prophetic tradition, and the developments of the Council were helping to recast Catholicism in the modern world. However, the elaboration of humanist Marxism in the 1950s and 1960s cannot be ignored when attempting to understand how Christians arrived at the liberationist critique of capitalism and imperialism. In Argentina specifically, this process of convergence occurred on a landscape in which, despite the overthrow of Perón, Peronism's popularity remained largely unchallenged by the hostility of Christians and the Left, demanding new political approach.

[66] *Ibid.* p. 109. Emphasis in original.
[67] *Ibid.* p. 119.

The site for potential collaboration with Marxism seemed to lie in so-called *tercermundismo,* which became a banner for Latin American anti-imperialist nationalism. Third World nationalism, argued the JDC, could not be equated to European nationalism, which served as 'ideological justification for imperialism'.[68] There was also an explicit, if rudimentary, class analysis in the JDC's perspective: while fascist nationalism, which had a prominent history in Argentina frequently connected to Catholicism, was interpreted to represent 'small sectors of the upper and middle class', *tercermundismo* represented an option for 'the popular masses'.[69] Peronism, while not equated monolithically with *tercermundismo*, was its principal referent by virtue of being Argentina's major mass movement. That Peronism had been transformed into a more explicitly proletarian movement was significant in this respect, permitting a more explicit class framework. Hence, as common cause could be established with socialists, the populist logic of people versus anti-people acquired at the same time a more salient element of class conflict.

One of the theoretical underpinnings of this anti-imperialism was the Marxist variant of dependency theory.[70] The roots of this framework lay in the UN Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) under Argentine economist, Raúl Prebisch, who advocated import substitution industrialisation policies in order to build internal markets and economic development that had generally been restricted to the global economic centres. Marxists like Andre Gunder Frank, Theotonio Dos Santos and Mauro Marini accepted certain insights of Prebisch's analysis, notably the role of dependent core-periphery relationships. However, they rejected the reformist prescriptions of merely encouraging industrialisation: former colonies

[68] *Ibid.* p. 117.
[69] *Ibid.* p. 117.
[70] For an insightful study of dependency perspectives, see Cristóbal Kay, *Latin American Theories of Development and Underdevelopment* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

could not merely follow the industrialisation path of imperialist powers; rather what was required was revolutionary transformation of such dependent relations. This was not only a rebuke of structuralism and modernisation theory, but also of the dominant perspective of the region's communist parties, which held that since capitalism was an objective precondition for socialism, and Latin American economies were considered semi-feudal, socialist change was impossible without a preceding bourgeois-democratic revolution.

Indeed, one of Marxist dependency theory's key features was a rejection of the prevailing notion of universal stages of development. Frank claimed, in contrast to ideas that Latin America was essentially pre-modern, that Latin America was from the conquest an integral part of global capitalism but maintained in a state of underdevelopment by the colonial centre.[71] In this perspective, a dialectical contradiction existed globally between exploiters and exploited (core-periphery). This was eagerly adopted by some influential Argentine theologians, such as Míguez Bonino, who emphasised the colonial roots of the unequal and dependent relationship between developed and underdeveloped countries: the industrialisation of the Northern countries occurred at a particular historical moment, 'built on the possibilities offered by the resources of dependent countries'.[72] Since Latin America was not in a position to exploit the resources of other dependent regions, the perceived 'take-off point' that would initiate the process of industrialisation and capitalisation simply could not occur: 'development and underdevelopment are not two realities, nor two stages in a continuum but two mutually related processes'.[73] Liberation thus pointed towards a transcendence of this dichotomy, which required a transformation of the neo-colonial relations of global capitalism.

Theologically, liberationists extended the rejection of false dualisms to a critique of the notion of a fundamental distinction between temporal and spiritual planes advanced in the

[71] Andre Gunder Frank, *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution: Essays on the Development of Underdevelopment and the Immediate Enemy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969).
[72] José Míguez Bonino, *Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age* (London: SCM, 1975), p. 16.
[73] *Ibid.* pp. 24-26; p. 16.

Maritain's theology.[74] The critique of this distinction of planes followed from an analysis that the Church itself is not autonomous from the world. Liberation theologians were increasingly interrogating the prevailing class divisions in society and, more controversially, the Church's role in this class dynamic. Gutiérrez emphasised that it was not on a purely theoretical basis that this was concluded: experience meant that people were 'keenly and painfully aware that a large part of the Church is in one way or another linked with those who wield economic and political power in today's world'.[75] This type of challenge had been articulated forcefully across Argentina in a series of intra-ecclesial conflicts, such as that in San Isidro in which slum-priests denounced the diocese's financial dependency on the elites.[76] Praxis – political commitment – on the side of the oppressed became central to the rejection of dualisms. Indeed, the renowned Argentine slum-priest, Mugica, argued that through praxis the Church could overcome two problems: the dualistic notion of good soul, bad body – which is an extension of the idea of sacred-profane dualism; and the conception of a Church-world dualism.[77]

On a more strictly political level, the emergence of Marxist dependency theory accompanied a growing insurgent left nationalism, especially the case in the wake of the Cuban Revolution. Certain major Peronist figures also began to establish an affinity with the Cuban Revolution, most notably John William Cooke, who soon became the figurehead of a revolutionary Peronist Left.[78] After the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, he developed a revolutionary Peronist perspective, offering an appraisal of Peronism via a class analysis which maintained that Peronism itself was characterised by a basic contradiction between social forces: the counterrevolutionary national bourgeoisie and union bureaucracy, on the one hand,

[74] Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation.* p. 43.
[75] *Ibid.* p. 40.
[76] '¡Curas expulsados! El obispo de San Isidro los echó por rebeldes', *Así*, 4 April 1968, p. 15.
[77] Carlos Mugica, *Peronismo y cristianismo,* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Merlin, 1973), p. 36.
[78] Daniel James, 'The Peronist Left, 1955-1975', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 8:2 (1976), pp. 273-296.

and the working classes, an objectively revolutionary force, on the other.[79] Cooke emphasised the importance of rank-and-file mobilisation, but also took inspiration from *foquismo* as a concrete strategy and organisational form for the revolutionary party.[80] The marriage of revolutionary and nationalist objectives was also a wider phenomenon that appeared in other spaces, such as in the Socialist Party of the National Left, driven forward by Jorge Abelardo Ramos and Jorge Enea Spilimbergo and with roots in both Trotskyism and the Peronism of the 1940s and 1950s. This tendency elaborated a slightly different iteration of Peronist populist rhetoric against the ruling oligarchy to Cooke's: anti-imperialism was here the most urgent task for socialists; class struggle was secondary.[81].

These political reconfigurations were in part the result of the Left's attempt in the 1950s and 1960s to rebuild their relationship with the Peronist popular classes, an experience shared with various Christian sectors. One important example was the worker-priests, a movement born in France in the 1940s and 1950s emphasising full immersion in the world of the working classes. Abolished in 1954, some of the movement's priests left Europe and a small number went to Argentina, including Francisco 'Paco' Huidobro, who settled in 1963 in the largely proletarian city of Avellaneda. By 1964, he was encouraging his fellow factory workers to affiliate to the national union and was elected delegate. Other priests joined Huidobro, forming a worker-priest team: they refrained from wearing cassocks, choosing instead to integrate as fully as possible as workers. When in August 1965 the factory management dismissed Huidobro, fourteen worker-priests from Buenos Aires declared their support for their 'brother priest' affirming their commitment to 'all workers'.[82]

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[79] John W. Cooke, *Apuntes para la militancia* (1964) https://www.marxists.org/espanol/cooke/apuntes.htm [accessed 25 June 2019].
[80] James, 'The Peronist Left, 1955-1975', 279-282.
[81] Omar Acha and Ariel Eidelman, 'Nacionalismo y socialismo: Jorge Abelardo Ramos y la "Izquierda Nacional"', *Taller: Revista de Sociedad, Cultura y Polítical*, 13 (2000), pp. 100-122.
[82] 'Los curas obreros', *Confirmado*, 9 September 1965, pp. 26-29. Most of these priests would later become important members of the MSTM.

It was necessary, in order to re-engage with the working classes, to engage seriously with Peronism. Future MSTM secretary, Miguel Ramondetti, recognised the need for some reconciliation with Peronism as early as Perón's overthrow. He noted the contrast between middle-class neighbourhoods celebrating and poorer Argentines 'crying, disconsolate. They had become orphans. We went silent, and from that night I began to reconsider things'.[83] Reassessments of Peronism occurred across various humanist tendencies, fracturing the anti-Peronist coalitions and individual parties in the years following the 1955 coup: the Socialist Party split into more and less rigidly anti-Peronist groups and within the Christian Democrats Horacio Sueldo's *Linea de Apertura* faction from 1959 was notably warmer towards Peronism than other quarters.[84] It is thus a curious observation to note the changing but still pivotal role of Peronism in driving both left and certain Catholic tendencies to parallel or complementary positions: from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s, these humanist sentiments maintained intransigent opposition to what they saw as the local variant of fascism; in the post-Peronist era, in contrast, they attempted to renew relationships with the largely Peronist masses from which they had become alienated.

This combination of the spectacular Cuban triumph and a developing Peronist and nationalist Left, on the other hand, managed to attract some previously anti-communist sectors. Some of the leadership of the revolutionary armed organisations of the late 1960s and the 1970s had, for instance, previously been active in *Tacuara*, a collection of violent nationalist cells with ideological influences ranging from Italian fascism to Falangism and antisemitic Catholic integrists.[85] *Tacuara* suffered an internal crisis when one group in Buenos Aires broke away from the Catholic nationalist leadership, opened up to Marxism and left-wing Peronism and

[83] Interview with José Pablo Martín, *Ruptura ideológica del catolicismo argentino. 36 entrevistas entre 1988 y 1992* (Los Polvorines: Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, 2013), p. 78.
[84] María Cristina Torti, *El "viejo" partido socialista y los orígenes de la "nueva" izquierda* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2009).
[85] 'Águilas, svásticas, violencia y un viejo enigma: ¿Quién mueve a Tacuara?', *Primera Plana*, 5 Feb. 1963, p. 21.

renouncing antisemitism.[86] The opening to a revolutionary national-popular Left was partly channelled through ecclesial structures, influenced by changing theological tendencies in the context of Vatican II, a process that occurred especially through specialised branches of Catholic Action. The Rural Movement of Catholic Action (MRAC), Young Catholic Workers (JOC), Catholic Student Youth (JEC) and Catholic University Youth (JUC), for example, provided spaces in which these political and religious tendencies were articulated, reproducing and translating an anti-liberal integral Catholicism in new circumstances: it is instructive to note here that some key *Montonero* leaders had in the early 1960s been both *Tacuara* and JUC activists. In the context of Vatican II and engagement with a resurgent anti-imperialist Left, these sectors began to take a more critical position with respect to the institutional Church's social and political role. For example, at the JUC National Encounter in January 1965, focused on discussions of commitment to God, the Church and the world, some local groups voiced concern over the Church's lack of social commitment to the working class.[87]

The Argentine Union Action (ASA) also exemplified a new, politicised commitment to worker mobilisation and anti-capitalist struggle within Catholicism. ASA had been formed in the 1950s from leading elements of the JOC inscribed in social doctrine, but from the first half of the 1960s developed an anti-capitalist discourse: 'An authentic syndicalism must be independent from the State, independent from the political parties and profoundly revolutionary in the face of oligarchical and capitalist structures that impede social and human promotion of the workers'.[88] In this statement in the first issue of ASA's journal in April 1963, the emphasis on worker autonomy differentiated the group from previous Catholic worker initiatives under episcopal authority: 'Syndicalism must be of the workers and for the workers,

[86] 'Move to Left Splits Argentine Nazis', *New York Times*, 19 Jan. 1964, p. 24.
[87] 'IX Encuentro Nacional, JUC. Bahía Blanca, Enero 1965', Archivo Mugica, Córdoba, Caja 3.
[88] ASA, 'La tesis del "Sindicalismo Cristiano"', in Alejandro Mayol, Norberto Habegger and Arturo Armada (eds.), *Los católicos posconciliares en la Argentina: 1963-1969* (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1970), p. 217.

organised, led and managed by the workers themselves and nobody else'.[89] In September of that year, ASA published a manifesto that declared that 'this is not the time for expectation, but for action and struggle for the working class'.[90] In the context of widespread worker mobilisations, the *Plan de Lucha,* it claimed a 'revolutionary' project for 'the workers to participate fully in all the wealth, culture and power'.[91] In reality, the immediate demands made of the government were rather more reformist in nature: a minimum wage; consultation of the workers' confederation in economic policy; breaking with the IMF; cancellation of petroleum contracts; and the repeal of repressive laws aimed at the working class. Nevertheless, combative unionism was emerging from within Catholic sectors, independent of episcopal authority and articulating social Catholicism in a discourse that emphasised, at least rhetorically, a revolutionary change of the structures of wealth and power.

[89] *Ibid.* p. 217.
[90] ASA, 'Manifiesto de ASA', in Mayol, Habegger and Armada (eds.), *Los católicos posconciliares,* p. 220.
[91] *Ibid.* p. 221.

By the mid-1960s, conditions had contrived to enable an affinity between Christianity, revolution, nationalism and a humanist disposition, as indicated by the appearance of a short-lived magazine in February 1965, *Izquierda Cristiana*:

> *Left* for us […] serves to identify ourselves in intellectual attitude with a position of transformation of the current socio-economic structures characterised by capitalism. But for us, our position is not reduced nor does it begin only in an ideal attitude, but includes a vital attitude with our homeland, with its history, with its great and beautiful tradition, with the liberating struggles of its heroes and all its men that sought the dignity of our people. For our *personalist conception*, the concrete struggle for national liberation comes before the defence of doctrines, although for our own definition we know that national liberation and popular dignity will be achieved with great authenticity when our conception – and being personalist and communitarian, it is most capable of being achieved – is instilled in the *Latin American national and popular* movement.[92]

In the above passage, it is apparent how Christian personalism and popular nationalism rooted in Peronism ('national and popular' is a clear allusion to Peronist themes) intersected in the formation of a revolutionary left Christianity. Although *Izquierda Cristiana* articulated this message early on, it was another journal, *Cristianismo y Revolución* (1966-1971), that would make the more lasting impact.[93]

Its founder, Juan García Elorrio, had been heavily influenced by the 1965 Catholic-Marxist dialogue in Buenos Aires. He soon became the nucleus for a small group of young

[92] 'La tesis del grupo Izquierda Cristiana', in Mayol, Habegger and Armada (eds.), *Los católicos posconciliares*, p. 249.
[93] For a useful study, see Gustavo Morello, *Cristianismo y Revolución. Los origines intelectuales de la guerrilla argentina* (Córdoba: Universidad Católica de Córdoba, 2003).

militants who as Catholic students had previously been under the spiritual guidance of Carlos Mugica.[94] García Elorrio formed the *Comando Camilo Torres*, a short-lived organisation inspired by the Colombian guerrilla-priest killed in early 1966, although younger members would soon break away to establish the *Montoneros*. The publication itself was partly a response to the political and ecclesial context of a turbulent 1966, during which General Juan Carlos Onganía's coup d'état had ushered in a stifling dictatorship characterised by repression, censorship and an elitist economic and political programme. Its first issue, in September 1966, was forthright: 'materialist capitalism and violent domination of the peoples and continents of the Third World' was 'consolidating in the consciousness of all men the affirmation of the new sign of our time: Revolution'.[95] *Cristianismo y Revolución* may not have been explicitly Marxist, but Marxism asserted a critical influence in its pages through figures such as Cooke and his fusion of Peronism with revolutionary class struggle.[96]

The magazine helped to shape the liberationist Christian movement, and provided a platform that expressed how Christians committed to live closer to the popular classes along with leftists and Peronists across the country were being brought together in the heat of intensifying social struggles. Such was the case in the sugar-growing province of Tucumán, where the regime had forcibly closed the refineries to rationalise production and violently suppressed the increasingly radicalised protests.[97] In the poor *villas* of Buenos Aires (and other cities), the *curas villeros* (slum priests) followed Huidobro's example by becoming active participants in worker struggles or fighting the dictatorship's plans to eradicate the shantytowns. Emblematic of converging groups was the *Confederación General del Trabajo de los Argentinos* (CGTA), a short-lived split in 1968 from the 'collaborationists' in the trade union confederation. The CGTA was led by the combative printworkers' union leader,

[94] 'Juan García Elorrio', *Cristianismo y Revolución*, Apr. 1971, p. 1.
[95] 'El signo revolucionario', *Cristianismo y Revolución*, Sept. 1966, p. 2.
[96] John William Cooke, 'Peronismo Revolucionario, *Cristianismo y Revolución*, Oct.-Nov. 1966, pp. 14-15.
[97] 'Tucumán.FUNTA y FOTIA: El fuego', *Cristianismo y Revolución*, Oct.-Nov. 1966, pp. 16-17.

Raimundo Ongaro, a key figure of the Christian Left, and featured the participation of various ASA figures.[98] Then, from May 1969, a series of popular rebellions by students and workers most momentously in Córdoba (known as the *Cordobazo*), but also subsequently in cities including Corrientes, Tucumán, Rosario, often with vocal support or active participation of politicised priests.[99] For Campos, these experiences and their articulation in *Cristianismo y Revolución* helped to crystallise a sense of class struggle, instead of the more traditional Catholic posture towards the poor as the object of charity, and an insurgent consciousness had begun to congeal around a combative left Peronism.[100]

In this formative context, from 1968, Argentine liberationist Christianity entered a crucial phase in its evolution, with the formation of the MSTM as an explicitly revolutionary clerical group. This development coincided with the organisational strengthening of the nascent regional movement and theology. This included ecclesial base communities, a diverse and uneven phenomenon that enabled a greater active role for lay Catholics were established across the continent (but especially in Brazil and Central America) throughout the 1960s.[101] Moreover, the second Latin American Episcopal Conference in Medellín in 1968 was driven largely by progressive bishops and its conclusions, while reflecting the input of different tendencies, contained significant liberationist themes. Shortly after the MSTM formed, similarly politicised priest groups emerged in other countries, notably ONIS (*Oficina Nacional de Investigación Social*) in Peru and *Golconda* in Colombia. Across the continent, in other

[98] *Cristianismo y Revolución* dedicated a full ten pages to the group as well as Ongaro in early 1969. *Cristianismo y Revolución*, April. 1969, pp. 14-24.
[99] 'El "Cordobazo"', *Cristianismo y Revolución*, June. 1969, pp. 6-9.
[100] Esteban Campos, *Cristianismo y Revolución. El origen de Montoneros. Violencia, política y religion en los 60* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2016), pp. 89-120.
[101] These communities were rather *ad hoc*, so no conclusive definition exists. But they were generally organised at the grassroots level and initially sanctioned by a hierarchy concerned with the pastoral crisis and the perceived threats of Protestantism and communism. Lay Catholics were able to assume a more participatory role in the ecclesial arena, and the communities often became an ecclesiological model for liberation theologians.

words, bolstered by certain institutional access and legitimacy, an insurgent consciousness was growing among Christians.[102]

While José Pablo Martín claimed that the MSTM's socialism was the product of an 'evolution of ideas and experiences in Catholicism', he nevertheless acknowledges a 'structural' (if not 'genetic') relation, as the schema of class struggle was assumed and the movement's general programme driving it closer to Marxism.[103] The MSTM's name stemmed from the explicitly socialist Message of Third World Bishops in 1967, that combined humanist language with a basic class analysis in an anti-imperialist key: 'certain social classes, certain races or certain peoples have not yet attained a truly human life […] The peoples of the Third World form the proletariat of present day humanity, exploited by the powerful and threatened in their very existence'.[104] Poverty, an impediment to human fulfilment, was understood not simply as an existential fact, but as a particular social relation, identified with systematic exploitation. Rather than appealing to the conscience of business leaders and economic elites to improve working conditions, the conclusion was that such a situation required a transfer of power and a transformation of property relations: 'the workers […] will not be content with mere increases in their wages. They want to be proprietors and not sellers of their work […] the human person cannot be bought or sold'.[105] The MSTM developed this revolutionary framework further and made more explicit its commitment to the abolition of private property: 'we consider necessary the definitive and total eradication of private property of the means of production'.[106]

The MSTM's foregrounding of class struggle increasingly involved an explicit option for Peronism as the hegemonic movement of the popular classes, a process that can be

[102] Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 130-149.
[103] Martín, *El Movimiento de Sacerdotes*, pp. 183-186.
[104] 'Manifiesto de los Obispos del Tercer Mundo', *Punto Final*, Dec. 1967, p. 2.
[105] F. Franic cited in *Ibid.* p. 4.
[106] Miguel Ramondetti, 'Sacerdotes para el III Mundo', *Cristianismo y Revolución*, July 1969, p. 2.

witnessed in the evolution of its six annual National Encounters up to the group's fragmentation in 1973-1974. During the first two Encounters in 1968 and 1969, the MSTM established basic commitments to constructing a Church committed to the poor, elaborating a prophetic message of liberation and, going further, adhering to a broadly defined revolutionary process.[107] In subsequent years, beginning with Rolando Concatti's 1970 reflection that prophetism must tend towards concrete political choices, more explicit commitments were made.[108] The highly contentious Encounter of 1971 addressed the issue of Peronism's relation to socialism and its concluding document reflected Cooke's position, suggesting that 'the truly revolutionary thing is the people, and the people is Peronist, therefore Peronism is revolutionary by intrinsic necessity'.[109] With the prospect of possible elections in the coming months, the Fifth Encounter in August 1972 went further, affirming that the people had acquired 'with Peronism the highest level of political consciousness and historical combativeness'.[110] By the following year and with a new Peronist government elected, political disagreements in the MSTM – no final document could be agreed at the Sixth Encounter in August 1973 – became unsustainable and the priests began to divide into at least three distinct factions.

The smallest of these can be described as socialist and was suspicious of Peronism and, in particular, the nationalist class-alliance position espoused by Perón that subordinated class struggle to nationalism. Belisario Tiscornia, for instance, echoed Lenin in asserting that 'imperialism is the reality of the dominion of the bourgeois class that has become international':

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[107] MSTM, 'Informe sobre el primer encuentro nacional de responsables zonales', in Domingo Bresci (ed.), *Documentos para la memoria histórica Movimiento de sacerdotes para el tercer mundo (Buenos Aires: Centro Salesiano de Estudios, 1994)*, pp. 44-47; MSTM, 'Coincidencias basicas', in Bresci (ed.), *Documentos para la memoria histórica*, pp. 71-72.
[108] Rolando Concatti, 'Profetismo y política', *Enlace*, July 1970.
[109] MSTM, 'Sintesis de la encuesta enviada a los miembros del movimiento sobre "peronismo-socialismo" en preparación del Cuarto Encuentro Nacional', in Bresci (ed.), *Documentos para la memoria histórica*, pp. 174-178.
[110] MSTM, 'Documento final del Quinto Encuentro Nacional', in Bresci (ed.), *Documentos para la memoria histórica*, p. 279.

> Struggles for national liberation founded in the conciliation of classes that have the same place of birth, and not in the class struggle that confronts exploiters and exploited with the same country, end up producing a re-accommodation of "autochthonous" bourgeois classes with respect to dominant bourgeois classes, with the aggravating consequence of having seduced the popular classes following the bourgeois concept of the nation.[111]

This statement alluded to Peronism's historical role as actually de-mobilising working-class militancy. Those within this tendency would feel vindicated when Perón advanced his Social Pact in 1973, appealing for compromise between business and trade unions. But Tiscornia also rejected any suggestion of 'specificities' of socialism for different countries and instead insisted that 'Socialism […] can be arrived at only through the class struggle in which the proletariat, along with the bourgeoisie, end as classes'.[112] Miguel Ramondetti, the MSTM Secretary General from the movement's inception, also represented this socialist tendency. However, the growing domination of Peronists in the movement isolated them and resulted in Ramondetti's resignation from the role in 1973.

In contradistinction to the socialist tendency was a left nationalist position, above all reflected in the Buenos Aires MSTM branch. This tendency reproduced a resolutely populist discourse infused with popular Catholicism. In a landmark essay by Lucio Gera and Guillermo Rodríguez Melgarejo, an attempt was made to comprehend the dimensions of the so-called popular Church: 'A fundamental contradiction is found in the elite-people opposition'.[113] The ecclesial elite camp, according to the authors, included a traditionalist and aristocratic, right-wing nationalism; a European progressivist element, emphasising Church-State separation and economic developmentalism; and, crucially, a second *Europeanising* tendency characterised

[111] Belisario Tiscornia, 'El eje de toda liberación es la lucha de clases', *Enlace,* Sept.-Oct.1972, p. 29.
[112] *Ibid.* p. 31.
[113] Lucio Gera and Guillermo Rodríguez Melgarejo, 'Apuntes para una interpretación de la Iglesia Argentina', *Cristianismo y Revolución*, September 1970, p. 63.

by Marxist influence.[114] Gera and Melgarejo appealed instead for a popular Catholicism, not yet 'formulated in intellectual expressions, but which pulsates with the vitality of the people'.[115] The people, they argued, combined Catholic faith with nationalism, exemplified by Peronism, and the authors engaged in a certain nationalist mythologising: 'People is land, fatherland, religion, autochthonous tradition, folklore'.[116] This analysis contained a clear element of continuation of the Catholic nationalist myth of the inherent Catholicity of Argentina and a focus on ethnicity and nation, but channelled through a class-inflected notion of the people.[117]

Such a position engendered internecine conflict both with Marxists and with Peronist factions with which they had previously been allied, in particular the Revolutionary Tendency that began to challenge the Peronist government when it failed to develop a left-wing programme. Carlos Mugica advanced an interpretation of national liberation that fundamentally differed from the position expressed by Tiscornia, but chimed with the left nationalist contentions of Abelardo Ramos, Spilimbergo and Laclau (and Haya de la Torre before them): 'the primary struggle for the liberation of our people' was 'national liberation'; the class struggle was a secondary task.[118] Those who followed this line tended to demand loyalty to Perón's corporatist political programme. Indeed, according to Víctor Hugo Arroyo, an MSTM member-priest from Goya, the Buenos Aires branch 'tried to present the movement as explicitly Peronist. This was contradicted with extreme care, clearly argued, to not raise the flag of any political party'.[119] Notwithstanding any such resistance, Buenos Aires members began to subordinate any class analysis to an ethnic-cultural framework, in which the political

[114] *Ibid.* pp. 63-64.
[115] *Ibid.* p. 64.
[116] *Ibid.* p. 64.
[117] This perspective was closely associated with the theology of the people. See Sebastián Politi, *Teología del pueblo. Una propuesta argentina a la teología latinoamericana, 1964-1975* (Buenos Aires: Castañeda-Guadalupe, 1992).
[118] Mugica, *Peronismo*, p. 41.
[119] Víctor Hugo Arroyo's testimony in Diana Marta (ed.), *Buscando el Reino. La opción por los pobres de los argentinos que siguieron al Concilio Vaticano II* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2013), p. 39.

subject was a national people and Perón was its highest expression. The MSTM should, this faction emphasised, be concerned with ensuring that the Church-institution was '*inserted in the People*', and in order to do so it was incumbent on the priests 'to participate in the People and with the People in the National *Justicialista* Movement'.[120]

In fact, the administration instead recruited right-wing politicians and individuals tied to business interests into government, who conspired to purge left-wing elements from political power and the movement.[121] One of the disputes involved, somewhat ironically, Perón and López Rega's *Plan Alborada* – a continuation of the previous military government's project for the eradication of shantytowns that had been fiercely opposed by *curas villeros* in Buenos Aires. When local activists allied to the *Montoneros* protested the plan in March 1974, one militant was shot dead by the police.[122] Mugica, who had ended up supporting the plan, blamed 'the irresponsibility of the police, yes, but also those that manipulate friends and use them for their own interests'.[123] This was illustrative of at least a partial renunciation of the revolutionary demands for the transfer of power to shantytown dwellers over their neighbourhoods.

In April 1974, with the MSTM having irreversibly fractured and with violence between the Peronist Left and Right escalating, the Buenos Aires branch attempted to re-establish the MSTM in its own image. The statement that was produced was inscribed in the analyses articulated by Gera and Tello, rooted in the myth of the Catholic nation and resolutely opposing Marxism as an imported atheistic materialism:

> This people, faithful to its profound cultural nucleus made from humanist and Christian values, knows that its revolutionary progress cannot be measured with purely material and economistic

[120] *Justicialismo* is the official Peronist movement. MSTM Buenos Aires, 'Reflexiones de Mayo de 1973: Iglesia y política', Aug. 1973, Archivo MSTM, Córdoba, Caja 8, p. 6; p. 16.
[121] Marina Franco, *Un enemigo para la nación. Órden interno, violencia y "subversion", 1973-1976* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2012).
[122] 'Una violenta represión', *Noticias*, 26 March 1974, p. 24.
[123] Cited in 'Mugica murió entre dos fuegos', *Movimiento*, May 1974, p. 16.

> criteria, but rather with those that take into account […] its profound Christian spirit over a materialist and atheist conception.[124]

The document also echoed Tello's interpretation that identified and rejected what he dismissed as an 'enlightened' tendency in the MSTM: 'it is not the "lucid" minorities or "intellectual elites" who have to decide and much less impose an imported revolutionary ideal, but the majority people'.[125] This was evocative of the orthodox Peronists' so-called third way, encapsulated by the slogan, 'neither yanks nor Marxists, Peronists', which was a formulation explicitly antagonistic to the Revolutionary Tendency's aspiration for a 'socialist fatherland'.[126] Moreover, whereas in the mid-1960s, Christians had discovered a common humanist language with Marxists, ten years later some of the principal liberationist Catholic figureheads were now brandishing humanism to mount a traditionalist rejection of Marxism as a threat to religious values and the inherent religiosity of the Argentine people. This shift may be compared to a similar process occurring across the continent, as CELAM had taken a conservative turn following Medellín and liberation theologians were increasingly marginalised in the preparations for the third episcopal conference in Puebla in 1979.[127]

The third major political tendency within the MSTM was associated with the so-called independent alternative position (*alternativistas*), especially reflected in the grassroots *Peronismo de Base* and the overlapping insurrectionary *Fuerzas Armadas Peronistas* (FAP). Rooted in the combative sectors during the resistance period (1955-1973), this phenomenon evinced the polysemous legacy of the Peronist experience.[128] It can be understood to some

[124] MSTM Capital Federal, *Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo. Hoy, 1974* (MSTM Capital Federal, 1974), p. 2.
[125] *Ibid.* p. 2.
[126] Jörg Le Blanc, *Political Violence in Latin America: A Cross-Case Comparison of the Urban Insurgency Campaigns of Montoneros, M-19 and FSLN in a Historical Perspective* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), p. 55.
[127] Enrique Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation (1492-1979)* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1981), pp. 222-239.
[128] Cecilia Luvecce, *Las Fuerzas Armadas Peronistas y el Peronismo de Base* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1993).

degree as a combination of Peronism and libertarian socialism; it corresponded to an identification of Peronism as the identity of the working class and the people, but within an anti-bureaucratic, classist perspective echoing Cooke. Such a position was hinted at in Rolando Concatti's 1972 pamphlet, *Nuestra opción por el peronismo*, which affirmed that the option was not for Perón as an individual but for oppressed socio-economic classes, whose real aspirations were for the overthrow of the system of exploitation and class conflict.[129] The Mendoza MSTM, whose most prominent members included Concatti, Oscar Bracelis, Agustín Totera and Vicente Reale, reaffirmed this idea in mid-1973: 'Revolutionary Peronism is not the only path to Socialism, but it is the *beginning* of Socialism in Argentina, because it is the national movement of the people and of the workers'; the option for Peronism was necessary only insofar as 'in Peronism, the working class has its highest level of organisation and combativeness'.[130] MSTM groups in Córdoba and Resistencia took similar positions and many of these priests had a long association with the combative union leaders, such as Raimundo Ongaro and Agustín Tosco.

Although *Peronismo de Base* and FAP celebrated the Peronist victory in 1973, they warned that 'while we have displaced the fascist dictatorship of the government, *we have not yet taken power*. True power, in the factories, land, money, arms, remains in the hands of the exploiters, be they Yankees or Europeans, national or foreign'.[131] In particular following the Ezeiza Massacre on 20 June – the triumphant return of Perón, which turned into a bloodbath when right-wing armed groups opened fire on the left – and the purge of left-wing Peronist politicians, revolutionary sectors viewed the government with deep suspicion. The *alternativistas*, in this context, unsurprisingly placed greater emphasis on autonomous self-organisation and grassroots pressure on the government from below:

[129] Rolando Concatti, *Nuestra Opción Por el Peronismo* (Buenos Aires: MSTM de Mendoza, 1972), p. 16.
[130] MSTM Mendoza, *Peronismo y Socialismo*, 30 July 1973, Archivo MSTM, Córdoba, Caja 8.
[131] 'Hablan las Fuerzas Armadas Peronistas', *Militancia*, 5 July 1973, p. 13.

> although all the traitors and their thugs will oppose us, we, the workers, will continue constructing *our own organisation* […] in order to *demand* the concretion of those measures that always remained promises; to *support* and if necessary *defend* against whoever the conquests achieved through the government; and to *denounce* and *confront* all those that try to curb the struggles for the emancipation of the workers.[132]

Rubén Dri was one of the MSTM priests that most closely identified with *alternativismo*. In early 1974, he published a series of articles in *Militancia* that outlined the necessity of the position, its basis in class struggle and anti-imperialism, its historical identification with Peronism and the tactics and strategies that should be adopted. Dri claimed that the Peronist administration was implanting a national bourgeois project, and an offensive by the trade union bureaucracy had to be resisted by grassroots militants, the working class and the diverse array of exploited groups across the country.[133] His perspective was characteristic of a commitment to political praxis from below: the method of the bureaucracy 'goes from top to bottom, imposing a verticalism that intensifies in moments of danger' while that of the grassroots 'goes from bottom to top. Democracy is not a mere theoretical postulate to be applied once one has taken power, but a demand that must be put into practice in the path to taking power'.[134]

In this spatialisation of popular power, we can read a renewed iteration of the basic Marxist humanist view of the dialectic: revolutionary change is not an external imposition but a result of the political praxis of the working classes. But, echoing Mariátegui's rejection of Haya de la Torre over forty years before, Dri explicitly rejected the left nationalist formula that

[132] *Peronismo de Base*, 'Ezeiza: La burocracia reprime al pueblo', *Documentos 1973-1976, Volumen 1. De Cámpora a la rupture*, ed. by Roberto Baschetti (Buenos Aires: Editorial de la Campana, 1996), p. 103.
[133] Rubén Dri, 'Necesidad de la alternativa', *Militancia*, 17 Jan. 1974, pp. 20-21.
[134] Rubén Dri, 'Los aspectos de la alternativa', *Militancia*, 24 Jan. 1974, p. 22.

separated national liberation from social liberation in justifying a class alliance: why, according to Dri, would a movement dominated by bourgeois interests and a right-wing union bureaucracy voluntarily enact a socialist programme against their interests? The working classes and the Peronist people, he asserted, had to create their own tools and organisational forms, independent of those interests.[135]

These political divisions within the MSTM were no doubt partly related to the dynamic of Peronism and Catholicism in Argentina, both of which can be described as universes in themselves since they contain vastly diverging interpretations, social sectors and tendencies. Nevertheless, it is also apparent that Marxism and the New Left inserted an important dynamic upon the movement. While only a relatively small sector self-identified explicitly as Marxist, this tendency was still influential and contained strategically important figures. Perhaps more importantly, the two main Peronist tendencies could be distinguished by their orientations towards socialism and especially by their constructions of the working class as a political agent. For the Buenos Aires MSTM, workers' struggle could be seen as a generally a secondary task to national liberation, and the working class formed part of a national people and culture characterised by popular religiosity and the leadership of Perón. In contrast, the more revolutionary left Peronists assumed more of the analytical elements of John William Cooke, understanding Peronism as not merely the working-class movement but itself internalising class conflict. The urgent task was therefore to build worker self-organisation and autonomy. Together, these three tendencies demonstrate the highly ambivalent posture within liberationist Christianity towards Marxism and the classist revolutionary movements of the rank-and-file.

[135] Rubén Dri, 'La alternative y la lucha de clases', *Militancia*, 31 Jan. 1974, pp. 20-22.

Conclusion

This article has conveyed a dynamic and historically evolving relationship between Marxism and Christianity in Argentina from the 1950s to the 1970s. Marxism was not simply a collection of analytical or theoretical tools that Christians, embroiled in a rapid transformation of the religious sphere, could draw upon. Certainly, in Argentina, Peronism played a key role as an intermediary here, and the Peronist experience up to 1955 alongside its subsequent brutal marginalisation assisted in driving Catholics and Marxists to parallel positions. But the wider Left in Latin America was also undergoing a thorough political and intellectual reconfiguration in the 1960s and 1970s, which both contributed to the development of a dialogue with Christians and helped to shape the evolution of the liberationist Christian movement. Changes within Marxism were epitomised above all in the New Left, which while diverse was unified by a sense of rejection of the strictures of traditional Left politics. Humanism, a common if not homogenous theme in the New Left, was a point of entry for both Christian and Marxist intellectuals to form philosophical and political dialogue. It appeared to represent a more optimistic view of the world, a renewal of human agency in a context of social injustice. Such a common language can be seen in common signifiers among both Marxists and progressive Christians in the 1960s, such as the notion of the New Man. Moreover, an emphasis on love, while traditionally used by Christians to rebuke the Marxist notion of class struggle, became a conspicuous characteristic of the language of the radical Left: 'the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love'.[136] Meanwhile, dependency theory and the revitalisation of left nationalism were able to draw elements of more conservative nationalism into a radical anti-imperialist political environment, in addition to helping shape the content and internal debates

[136] David Deutschmann (ed.), *Che Guevara Reader: Writings on Politics and Revolution* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2003), p. 225.

of liberationist sectors. With these processes in mind, an account of the development of liberationist Christianity emerges that does not simply depict a one-way relationship in which Christian sectors opened up to the Left. Rather, a more dynamic, multifaceted relationship becomes clear, with the Left also building a foundation for dialogue and the articulation of Christianity with socialism and revolutionary anti-imperialism.

But the rapprochement of Marxism and Christianity did not mean a coherent political alliance nor a clear or cogent intellectual synthesis. Liberationist Christianity's relationship to Marxism remained complex and ambivalent. In Argentina, the liberationist Christian movement did not simply internalise and replicate the divisions on the wider Left. But such debates did enter the internal discussions and dynamics of liberationist Christianity, and were given specific inflections relating within the religious context and the political fact of Peronism. The political fragmentation of the Third World Priests in the first half of the 1970s was in large part down to disagreements relating to Peronism, as well as related to the relationship of their movement with the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, understanding the historically dynamic and ambivalent relationship with Marxism can illuminate certain crucial elements of such divisions, as well as the wider characteristics of the New Left and Cold War political culture in Argentina.