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Hugo Chávez's Appropriation of the Liberationist Legacy in Latin America

Hugo Chávez (1954–2013), the former president of Venezuela (1999–2013), brought Latin American populism to a global audience through his rhetorical remarks and controversial appearance in the global media. Theological and biblical metaphors were part of this rhetoric. The article argues that Hugo Chávez's appropriation of theological metaphors in his populist political discourse could be considered as a symptom of the continuing influence and relevance of liberation theology in Latin America during the two last decades of victorious leftism on the continent. On one hand, liberation theology as a social movement had been weakened, especially within the Catholic Church. On the other, the bureaucratic language from the neoliberal era, tied to the Washington consensus, was to a high degree exhausted and replaced by a populist language that paved the way for the inflow of religious and Christian metaphors into politics. Chávez's use of these metaphors in a way that was consistent with liberation theology points to Christian and Latin American liberationist discourse as a crucial factor in the resurgence of the political left within a religiously vibrant region.

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> *Ayer estuvo el diablo aquí, en este mismo lugar. ¡Huele a azufre todavía esta mesa donde me ha tocado hablar! Ayer, señoras, señores, desde esta misma tribuna el señor Presidente de los Estados Unidos, a quien yo llamo "el diablo," vino aquí hablando como dueño del mundo, como dueño del mundo.*
>
> Yesterday, the devil came here, right here. And it smells of sulfur still today, this table that I am now standing in front of. Yesterday, ladies and gentlemen, from this rostrum, the President of the United States, the gentleman to whom I refer as the devil, came here, talking as if he owned the world; truly, as the owner of the world.
>
> Hugo Chávez at the United Nations' General Assembly, September 20, 2006

On 20 September 2006, Hugo Chávez Frías (1954–2013) reached a global audience when he labelled George W. Bush "the devil" in front of the United Nations' General Assembly. It was, however, not only a manifestation of the Venezuelan president's populist discourse. It was also an enactment of a religious discourse that Chávez himself had inscribed within the tradition of Latin American liberation theology. Through this discourse Chávez repeatedly presented himself as a pious follower of Jesus, in contrast to his rivals in the Catholic episcopacy. Besides, he utilised theological concepts and biblical stories to attach the Boliviarian Revolution to the Kingdom of God in ways that made the two entities into one reality.

Over the last two decades there has been an unprecedented wave of leftist candidates that have entered governing offices throughout the Latin American region.[1] This wave of democratically elected leftists began with the election of Hugo Chávez as Venezuela's president in 1998 and might be said to be ended with the impeachment of Brazil's Dilma Rousseff from the Workers' Party (PT) in 2016.[2] Prior to his death in 2013, Chávez had been the longest governing president on the continent, while constantly making use of religious signifiers, such as "Christ," "God" or "salvation." These signifiers stood at the forefront of the social and political conflict during the tumul-

[1] Thanks to Benedicte Bull for critical remarks on an earlier version of this article.

[2] "Brazil underwent a sudden U-turn in policy priorities and ideological orientation with the 55–22 Senate vote, on 12 May, in favour of opening an impeachment process against President Dilma Rousseff, the country's first female president, who was then by law suspended from office and replaced by her vice president, 75-year old Michel Temer" (Jonathan Stevenson, "Brazil's Political and Economic Crisis," *Strategic Comments* 22, no. 3 [2016]).

tuous period of Chávez's governance from 1998 until 2013.[3] In the national arena, Chávez repeatedly attached his political project to God's will in terms that supplemented his democratic legitimacy with a theocratic one. Religion, and more precisely Christianity, played a perhaps surprisingly visible role in Venezuela's political game, before being exported to the global political arena through Chávez's famous speech at the United Nations and his theological criticism of the Vatican during the papacy of Benedict XVI (2005–2013).

Chávez's adversary in Rome had as cardinal led the Vatican's process that eventually condemned some aspects of liberation theology as a danger to the Catholic faith, in other words as heresy. After the fall of communism in East Europe the same cardinal, Joseph Ratzinger, was one of the most influential ecclesial voices that would contribute to the impression of the demise of liberation theology.[4] At a meeting in May 1996 with the presidents of the Doctrinal Commissions of the Bishops' Conferences of Latin America, the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith stated that "the fall of the European governmental systems based on Marxism turned out to be a kind of twilight of the gods for that theology of redeeming political praxis."[5] Others constructed the image of a liberation theology movement that was not only outdated intellectually, but also without influence at the social and political level in Latin America. The sociologist Peter Beyer concluded in 1994 that despite its efforts in mobilizing the grassroots, the liberation theology movement had rather "meagre results."[6] Neither intellectually relevant nor socially influential, it could be dismissed with the words of the political

[3] David Smilde, "Christianity and Politics in Venezuela's Boliviarian Democracy: Catholics, Evangelicals, Political Polarization," in *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy: Participation, Politics, and Culture under Chávez*, ed. David Smilde and Daniel Hellinger (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 315.

[4] Headlines such as "Did It Liberate? Liberation Theology: Post Mortem" would reflect the supposition that liberation theology was dead after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. See *Religion & Liberty* 2, no. 1 (1991). *New York Times* reported at the end of John Paul II's papacy that he had "crushed liberation theology," leaving the impression that it no longer exists as a force and movement within the Latin American Catholic Church. Timothy J. Steigenga and Edward L. Cleary, *Resurgent Voices in Latin America: Indigenous Peoples, Political Mobilization, and Religious Change* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 9. Or as Robert A. Sirico would have it after John Paul II's encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, "[…] this encyclical constitutes the epitaph for liberation and collectivist movements.[…] The 'Christian-Marxist dialogue' is dead." Quoted in "Did It Liberate? Liberation Theology: Post Mortem."

[5] John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne, *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 228.

[6] Peter Beyer, *Religion and Globalization* (London: Sage Publications, 1994), 157.

scientist Edward Lynch: "Liberation theology has been reduced to an intellectual curiosity," since it simply had failed in "their main mission, the complete renovation of Latin American Catholicism."[7] While one could obviously seek counterevidence to the intellectual stagnation of liberation theologians after 1989[8] and their hypothesized absence or minimal importance for the post–Cold War Catholic Church in Latin America,[9] I will counter the idea of liberation theology's death by suggesting a crucial influence in the leftist political victories on the continent, in the case of Hugo Chávez. In a desecularized region where religiosity is an unavoidable reality for candidates to major political offices, I will look for the possible importance of liberation theology as a source for religious legitimacy for a figure like Chávez and as a pre-existent discourse at his disposal in the construction of a populist rhetoric.

The affinity between Latin American populism and liberation theology's populist traits strengthen the case that an alliance or a bond between the two is present and operative in Chávez's speeches. Through a chronological presentation of the development of Chávez's political theology and its historical context, an increasing ideologization will become manifest and reflect Chávez's inscription within the tradition of Latin American liberation theology. Liberation theology is in this context neither powerless nor dead. It has rather assumed a powerful role, legitimizing Chávez's own "option for the poor," his populist leftism and its distributive policies in favor of the poor.

The origins of Chávez's leftist project were not primarily to be found in the Communist International that eventually led to the Cuban revolution in 1959,[10] in spite of Chávez's strategic alliance with the Castro brothers during his presidency. Chávez's roots were not in an orthodox political left that

[7] Edward Lynch, "The Retreat of Liberation Theology," *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* (February 1994), 12 .

[8] One of the most creative renovations of Latin American liberation theology took place at Depto Ecumenico de Investicaciones (DEI), Costa Rica in the 1990s, especially in the intersection of theology and economy. Franz J. Hinkelammert, *Sacrificios Humanos Y Sociedad Occidental: Lucifer Y La Bestia* (San José: Editorial DEI, 1991); Jung Mo Sung, *La Idolatría Del Capital Y La Muerte De Los Pobres* (San José: Editorial DEI, 1991); *Neoliberalismo Y Pobreza: Una Economía Sin Corazón* (San José: Editorial DEI, 1993). For a more general overview of the post-Cold war liberation theology in Latin America see Ivan Petrella, *Latin American Liberation Theology: The Next Generation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005), 147–73.

[9] One example of how liberation theology's grassroot mobilization was reshaped in the neoliberal era is to be found in Christian Smith and Joshua Prokopy, *Latin American Religion in Motion* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1999), 67–90.

[10] Jorge G. Castañeda, "Latin America's Left Turn," *Foreign Affairs* 853 (May/June, 2006).

has seen religion as a social ill to be ignored, combated or even eradicated. Chávez arose from another leftist tradition in Latin America: the populist left.[11] This is a political tradition with an ambiguous legacy with regard to institutionalized religion, such as the Catholic Church. But in contrast to the secularist orientation of the orthodox left in Latin America, Chávez's populism was not antithetical to religion in itself.

In his autobiographical accounts Chávez sometimes emphasized his Catholic background as a pious kid praying the Lord's Prayer every night and participating in the church as an altar boy.[12] According to Chávez's memory, his mother wanted him to become a Catholic priest. She often went to participate in the Mass, while Chávez's grandmother represented another influence. She met the boy's willingness to help the priest during the Mass as an altar boy with scepticism. Although she confessed to believe in God, she told the boy to be careful with the priests. He should not believe in everything they said, she argued. Nonetheless, according to Chávez, he was indeed influenced by Catholic priests in his childhood. He particularly highlights the influence of one priest who came to his parish in the 1960s, when Chávez was around 10 years old, "el Padre Velasquez."[13] This priest preached ideas that were later to be associated with liberation theology, such as the interpretation of the mission of the church as the preferential option for the poor. At that time Chávez started to identify himself personally with the revolutionary figure of Jesus. Decades later, Chávez was well aware that priests such as Padre Velasquez and the theological concepts he disseminated resonated with the papacy of Juan XXIII and historical events in the Catholic Church in the same decade, such as the Second Vatican Council and the Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín in 1968.[14]

[11] Steven Levitsky and Kenneth M. Roberts, *The Resurgence of the Latin American Left* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 15; Castañeda, "Latin America's Left Turn," 33.

[12] In a more critical presentation of Chávez's biography, this religious background of serving as an altar boy for the priest is also accepted: Rory Carroll, *Comandante: Myth and Reality in Hugo Chávez's Venezuela* (Penguin Press: New York, 2013), 3.

[13] Hugo Chávez Frías and Ignacio Ramonet, *Hugo Chávez: Mi Primera Vida* (New York: Vintage, 2014), 190–93.

[14] Ibid., 194.

Populist Revival with Chávez's Rule

In recent years, Latin America has experienced a revival of populism. During the 1990s the continent saw new expressions of populism that coexisted with neoliberal structural adjustment policies, in a notable contrast to populism's classical forms from the 1930s and the decades after. This led scholars to a greater degree to emphasise populism as a specific way of attaining political hegemony through a typical discourse, instead of attaching populism to an economic model or stage of socioeconomic development.[15] Populism can be understood as primarily about domination, not redistribution. This is in spite of many populists' redistributive policies, especially of leftists like Chávez. Because domination in a democracy is closely connected to or based on legitimacy, political theology that justifies or derives political power from the divine needs to be considered in a discussion of populism and religion. Liberation theology could be labelled a Latin American innovation that pertains to the domain of political theology.

The populist revival in the 2000s was first and foremost a leftist revival in Latin America, with representative figures such as Chávez in Venezuela, Rafael Correa in Ecuador and Fernando Lugo in Paraguay.[16] These three built their power on charismatic authority without bases in a strong organisation and even less in an established party. It was rather their personality and discourse that gave political expression to disorganised and heterogeneous forms of social demands. As Ernesto Laclau observes, when these social demands are not met by the prevailing power in a given society the demands may continue to increase and the symbolic framework might start to disintegrate. In this way a new political space is left open for new agents.[17] This broadly applies to the situation in the 1990s before Chávez reached power, when the sinking oil prices, the prevailing neoliberal policies, and political corruption caused a disintegrated social space. The "Caracazo" massacre in 1989 and Chávez's failed attempt at a military coup in 1992 can be considered as symptoms of this deeper symbolic disintegration. It was in these circumstances that a new political imaginary was welcomed by the Venezuelan voters in 1998. This new imaginary was upheld in Venezuela by Chávez,

[15] Kenneth M. Roberts, "Latin America's Populist Revival," *SAIS Review* 27, no. 1 (2007): 4; Kurt Weyland, "Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics," *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 11.

[16] Levitsky and Roberts, *Resurgence*, 15.

[17] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 86.

more so than other means, through official speeches, interviews, and his television show, *Aló Presidente*.

Chávez's deliberate use of this programme reveals part of the nature of the populist discourse. The imaginary of the populist has few ideological limits and does not demand of itself a coherent political discourse. Therefore it does not obey the modern imperative of separating religion and politics. Instead, it follows a different logic in the struggle for power and legitimacy, and this opens the way for religion to be incorporated into and subsumed within the populist discourse. This leaves the space open for seemingly more spontaneous and affective enactments of its discourse, which communicate meanings in ways that are very different from purely conceptual apprehension.[18]

In Latin America this conceptual apprehension of reality left its traces in the technocratic discourse of the Washington consensus that to varying degrees was articulated by the politicians that implemented its policy.[19] Neopopulists like Carlos Menem and Alberto Fujimori implemented the structural adjustment programmes without restricting themselves to its discourse. Others privileged to a greater extent the condensed signifiers in this technocratic discourse as "market stability" and "democratic consolidation" in their efforts of legitimating and implementing neoliberal economic policies.[20] Because such a technocratic or bureaucratic discourse derives from economic theory, it avoids an affective construction of "the people," even more so in religious terms. It excludes in principle religious signifiers from its mode of naming reality in the name of modern rationality and its separation between religion and other public spheres.

The revival of populism in Latin America coincided with the popular dissatisfaction with neoliberal policies amidst financial crises,[21] policies that were either carried out by neopopulist or technocratic politicians. The new wave of leftist populism indicated not only the dissatisfaction with the policies that followed from the Washington consensus, but also the exhaustion of the privileged signifiers in the technocratic discourse. In the 2000s these signifiers could—to a lesser degree than in the 1990s—play the role of maintain-

[18] Ibid., 71.

[19] Roberts, "Latin America's Populist Revival," 4.

[20] Yann Basset, "Aproximación a Las Nociones De Populismo Y Gobernabilidad En Los Discursos Contemporáneos Sobre América Latina," *Ópera: Observatorio de políticas, ejecución y resultados de la Administración Pública*, no. 6 (2007): 35–37.

[21] Roberts, "Latin America's Populist Revival," 5.

ing neoliberal hegemony in Latin America. In countries such as Venezuela, populism returned and invaded its hegemonic space through a renewed social mobilisation.

Given populism's room for religion in politics, the return of populism in Latin America could also be categorised as a certain return of religion in the public sphere. Where the former technocratic discourse excluded religious signifiers from the political field, the populist vocabulary included these signifiers in a way that resulted in a revitalisation and deprivatisation of themes, metaphors, and concepts from the traditional Christian imaginary.[22] Christian theological concepts such as "salvation" or "resurrection" are at the outset shared by a wide spectrum of agents, movements, and institutions in the religious field in a Latin American country like Venezuela. The concepts themselves are part of a common vocabulary for all Protestants of various denominations and for Catholics of very different orientations, though the use and the meaning of this vocabulary vary to a high degree.

Friend and Enemy

In populism the charismatic and often authoritarian politician constantly returns to various descriptions of "the people." In this way "the people" is constructed as "an attempt to give name to that absent fullness"[23] that is manifest and visible through the unfulfilled social demands. Some descriptions, words, or signifiers will be privileged in this discursive construction and there are no major conceptual or ideological obstacles to the inclusion, incorporation, or appropriation of religious signifiers or metaphors. The question for religion is rather: In what way can it contribute to the populist's investment and engagement in signifying games that articulate the fundamental distinction between friend and enemy in the struggle for hegemony?

Kurt Weyland writes with reference to Carl Schmitt that "in espousing antielite rhetoric and challenging the status quo, populism rests on the distinction of friend versus foe that constitutes politics."[24] Regardless of whether one agrees with Schmitt that this is constitutive for politics, populism artic-

[22] This revitalisation corresponds to what José Casanova in his 1994 book described as an "interrelated process of repoliticization of the private religious and moral spheres and renormativization of the public economic and political spheres." José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5–6.

[23] Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 85.

[24] Weyland, "Clarifying a Contested Concept," 11.

ulates this distinction. It interprets, conceptualises, and dramatizes this distinction in polarising terms over and over again. Therein is the potential for a populist narrative, a plot.[25]

Christianity is more and more pluralist on this continent,[26] but in its diverse and competing forms Latin American Christianity provides a widely shared cosmological view of a distinction between friend and enemy: God and the devil, or heaven and hell. Part of this religious imaginary is the decisive and ongoing drama between good and evil, forces of the friend on the one hand and forces of the enemy on the other. Whether or not one can apply this cosmological drama to politics is a subject of major disagreement between the many Christian groups, not to mention the disagreements about *how* this drama should be understood or transferred to politics.

Pentecostalism has transformed the religious landscape on the continent in the last few decades, constituting the main challenge to Catholicism. Pentecostal groups have often expressed hostility against the Catholic faith, including its liberationist version. Still, even the most hostile Pentecostals towards liberation theology could agree with their liberationist opponents that the cosmological battle, or what these Pentecostals might call a "spiritual warfare," has a meaning vis-à-vis the social, political, and economic realities of Latin America. Nevertheless, the way in which these evil forces at work in these realities might be discerned and interpreted would be very different in Pentecostal preaching compared to the Catholic-dominated liberation theology.[27] The liberation theologians would, in contrast to most Pentecostal preachers, emphasise the need for a hermeneutical conscience. In addition to this, liberation theology would apply a social analysis in this hermeneutical process that would make its political ideology visible.

[25] Basset, "Aproximación," 42.

[26] Daniel H. Levine, "The Future of Christianity in Latin America," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 41, no. 1 (2009).

[27] This does not imply that there are no Pentecostal churches or communities on the continent that cultivate and apply liberation theology. There are, though they are minority voices within Pentecostalism. Considering Venezuela, an interesting case of an active Pentecostal mobilisation was an Evangelical protest against Venezuela's political establishment prior to Chávez's presidential campaign during the 1990s, called "Clamor por Venezuela" (Smith and Prokopy, *Latin American Religion*, 125–46). When the one Evangelical political party in the country decided to support the leader of the discredited Social Democratic Party in the 1998 elections, many evangelicals protested: David Smilde, "Contradiction without Paradox: Evangelical Political Culture in the 1998 Venezuelan Elections," *Latin American Politics and Society* 46, no. 1 (2004).

Given populism's room for religion and Hugo Chávez's leftist orientations, the question should be raised: Might there be connections between the liberationist theological discourse and the populist one? Is it a coincidence that the populist Hugo Chávez placed himself within the tradition of the Christian faith and, more precisely, liberation theology?

The Populist Traits of Liberation Theology

Latin American liberation theology has received much attention because of its closeness to Marxist thought and Marxist-inspired political groups. Still, one could ask whether Marxism has been as crucial for the formation of liberation theology in the region as a phenomenon like populism. Liberation theology was primarily neither a Marxist movement nor a populist movement. It was an ecclesial movement, organising itself within and on the margins of churches all over Latin America. Still, it bore traits and was influenced by other social and political actors and discourses in its formation, among them Latin American populism. Historically, liberation theology was formed in the aftermath of classic populism and the subsequent attempt by military regimes to eradicate it.[28]

In Brazil, the country where liberation theology gained its greatest foothold within the Catholic Church, it surged within a political climate marked by Getúlio Vargas's state-driven middle-class populism and the subsequent dictatorship's attack on this populism.[29] When factions or the so-called "prophetic voices" within the Brazilian Catholic church reacted against the country's military regime, it was orientated towards populism and became what José Casanova has described as a "populist" church.[30]

Argentina is another example of how the experience of Peronist populism shaped the development of liberation theology, for instance through a movement like *Movimiento de Sacerdotes por el Tercer Mundo* (*MSTM*).[31] A high profile figure like the Jesuit Carlos Múgica opted for Peronism and joined the Peronist government that came to power after the first democratic elections in 1973. Even the guerrilla movement Montoneros which was founded by Catholic students opted for Peronism, inspired by the progressivism from the

[28] Basset, "Aproximación."

[29] Casanova, *Public Religions*, 118.

[30] Ibid., 134.

[31] David Lehmann, *Struggle for the Spirit: Religious Transformation and Popular Culture in Brazil and Latin America* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 62.

Second Vatican Council and Medellín. Liberation theology's "option for the poor" from the regional Medellín meeting was translated into a political option for Peronist populism on a national level in Argentina. This happened after both Peronists and radical Catholics had joined forces to fight repression together under the military dictatorship.

This co-operation and community might also explain in part why some of the language of liberation theology seems to resemble the language employed in populism. Both discourses, classical populism and liberation theology, have centred around the construction of "the people" and "the poor" or "the humble." Liberation theology's signifiers such as "the church of poor," "the people's church" or "the popular church" seem to resemble the populist ones. Often the friends of this ecclesial movement were mentioned as "the poor," "the oppressed," "the people," etc. More seldom were the enemies so designated and often only implicitly. But sometimes they were identified, as when "the father" of liberation theology wrote in his ground-breaking book from 1971: "To be with the oppressed is to be against the oppressor."[32] But the enemy was more often identified on an impersonal level, articulated as "capitalism," "imperialism," or "conservative forces," as in Leonardo Boff's book from 1981, *Igreja e Poder*.[33] Here liberation theology's enemies inside the church were identified to such a degree that the Vatican banned the book and silenced Boff in a conflict that received international attention.[34]

Without employing the dichotomy in such a dramatic plot as espoused in populism, liberation theology based its discourse on a distinction between friend and enemy with various categorical oppositions: the church of the poor versus Christendom, Latin American theology versus European theol-

[32] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 173. In the Spanish original: "Optar por el oprimido es optar contra el opresor," *Teología De La Liberación: Perspectivas* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1999 [1971]), 337.

[33] Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1985).

[34] Leonardo Boff (1938–) was in 1984 submitted to a process by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Vatican, due to theses in his book *Church: Charism and Power*. The process in the Vatican was led by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (1927–) who later would become Pope Benedict XVI. Because Boff's theses, according to Ratzinger "endanger the sound doctrine of the church." Boff was in 1985 condemned to "obsequious silence." Thereby he was removed from his editorial functions and suspended from religious duties. The following year, the Vatican allowed Boff to return to some of his previous activities. In 1992, Boff renounced his activities as a priest, according to himself because of renewed threats of a second punitive action by Rome.

ogy, liberating religion versus oppressive religion.[35] I would argue that in this way there was an inherent populism in liberation theology on a discursive level,[36] although its form was more appropriate and adjusted to an ecclesial and an academic discourse than a populist and political one. In both liberation theology and populism "the people" or "the poor" were not empirical and quantitative facts, but rather privileged signifiers that condensed the whole antagonistic field and drew the line between friend and enemy. They were attempts at gaining hegemony, though often failed attempts. This is reflected in the dashed hopes in many ecclesial base communities of transforming the ecclesial institution into a revolutionary force in society.[37]

Though liberation theology aimed at attaining hegemony within the Catholic Church, with the result of being partly marginalised and silenced, it also aimed at transforming society and mobilising the people to "liberation" or "revolution." The content of this last signifier varied from context to context and was also a subject of discussion. But one of the main achievements of liberation theology could be said to be the gaining of legitimacy for the idea of a political revolution, whatever the content of such a revolution might be. We might state that liberation theology, along with other social movements, contributed to the legitimacy of a vague notion of revolution, thereby making it more vulnerable to opportunistic and populist appropriations. Although liberation theology as a movement had been drastically weakened by the time the new generation of leftist populists won elections in Latin America, this theology had left a discursive reservoir that could be drawn upon to influence the social and political field.

I would argue that these historical connections and discursive similarities indicate the usefulness, flexibility, and plasticity of certain elements in liberation theology to populist political discourse. At the same time, these links might also help to recognise these same elements at work in a particular populist discourse like that of Hugo Chávez.

The ecclesial marginalisation of liberation theology that I referred to above should nevertheless remind us that the influence of religious groups

[35] Malik Tahar Chaouch, "La Teología De La Liberación En América Latina: Una Relectura Sociológica," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología (México)* 69, no. 3 (2007): 431.

[36] There are significant differences between liberation theology and populism on a more social level, especially the stark contrast between liberation theology's efforts of organising the poor into base communities and mobilising the poor through hierarchical organisations like the churches. Populism in Weyland's definition works primarily on a discursive level relatively independently of organising efforts. This does not exclude the fact that liberation theology as well as populism both operated on a discursive level and can be compared on this level.

[37] Lehmann, *Struggle for the Spirit*, 76.

connected to this theological line of thought has been limited, especially in recent years. That does not, however, exclude the possibility that the significance of this theology might be greater among politicians than priests, agents we by custom consider as secular rather than religious. While liberation theology undoubtedly has lost influence in the religious sphere, the question of its influence in the secular political sphere remains, especially given the recent wave of electoral victories for the political Left on the continent. Hugo Chávez's application of Christian ideas may provide some answers.

Establishing the Populist Narrative by Religious Means

When Chávez officially took office as Venezuela's president on February 2, 1999, he proclaimed that "a new epoch" with "a new national existence" had begun. This was on the basis of Venezuela's "ethical crisis" and past difficulties. Furthermore, a confession of sins was needed for this new national existence, according to Chávez. He maintained that every Venezuelan was guilty for the country's situation, and quoted Jesus's rhetorical question from the Gospel of John (8:7) to underline this: "Who is to throw the first stone?" Then the president went on to act like a Catholic priest leading his congregation through confession:

> *Reconozcámoslo, creo que es momento de reconocer nuestras culpas, todos las tenemos, yo también. ¿Quién lanza la primera piedra? Yo hago un llamado y es mi primer llamado, como Presidente de Venezuela, a que todos reconozcamos nuestras culpas como hacemos en la Iglesia, Monseñor: "Por mi culpa, por mi culpa, por mi gran culpa."*[38]
>
> Let us acknowledge it, I think it's time that we recognise our faults, we all have them, I as well. Who throws the first stone? I make a call and it is my first call as President of Venezuela that we all recognise our faults like we do in Church, Father: "Through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault."[39]

Chávez called everyone to repentance, before he used the occasion to declare that his role in the attempted military coup in 1992 was totally le-

[38] H.C. Frías, *Selección De Discursos Del Presidente De La República Bolivariana De Venezuela, Hugo Chávez Frías: 1999, Año De La Refundación De La República* (Ediciones de la Presidencia de la República, 2005), 7.

[39] Translations of Chávez's speeches into English are mine.

gitimate. This was not the first time Chávez appropriated Christian themes. Through his electoral campaign he had frequently employed biblical imagery juxtaposed with war terminology and nationalistic ideas. These signifiers seemed to help him win the elections and to polarise opinion.[40] The division had been introduced by his discourse but Chávez was still referring to everyone in Venezuela as part of the new national existence, of what he in his campaign had named "Venezuela's salvation." In his inaugural speech Chávez invested in another theological concept from the Christian tradition besides salvation, namely "resurrection":

> *Hoy en Venezuela estamos presenciando, estamos sintiendo, estamos viviendo una verdadera resurrección. Sí, en Venezuela se respiran vientos de resurrección, estamos saliendo de la tumba [...].*[41]
>
> Today in Venezuela we are witnessing, feeling, living through a true resurrection. Yes, in Venezuela, we breathe the winds of resurrection, we are coming out of the tomb [...].

For Chávez, Venezuela as a nation was almost buried dead, but thanks to God, this nation would never die. Therefore the country was experiencing "a true resurrection" from the grave. This image of the nation as resurrected from the dead became one of Chávez's favoured metaphors for the new nation in the years to come,[42] and in his inaugural speech he connected the resurrection to the revolution. In this way he placed the salvific act of the Christian God on the same level as the revolutions in Venezuelan history: the people experience the resurrection when it regains its conscience and recuperates itself, and this "has no other name than revolution." In spite of this link to human achievements, Chávez's version of the Christian resurrection was by no means detached, secularised, or isolated from its Christological meaning in the Christian tradition.

Chávez would make continuous references to Christ, as he also did in his first official speech as president, when he presented his first version of a minimal Christology. He referred to a popular saying and in that way inscribed his faith or religiosity within a civil religion or popular Catholicism.

[40] Smilde, "Christianity and Politics," 321.

[41] Frías, *Selección De Discursos 1999*, 12.

[42] Marco A. Moreno"Metaphors in Hugo Chávez's Political Discourse: Conceptualizing Nation, Revolution, and Opposition," PhD dissertation, The City University of New York, 2008, http://elies.rediris.es/elies27/APONTE_MORENO_FINAL_THESIS.pdf, 113–116.

Hence, from the beginning Chávez did not limit the basis or resonance for his religious signifiers to liberation theology. He also drew upon a larger Christian imaginary.

> *"Por la verdad murió Cristo," se dice mucho en nuestros pueblos; soy uno de los que cree que si por la verdad murió Cristo, y si por la verdad tiene que morir uno más, pues aquí estoy a la orden [...]. Una de mis principales tareas queridos amigos y así la asumo, es decir las verdades en las que creo, porque la verdad, la verdad verdadera, sabemos nosotros los católicos que la tiene Dios.*[43]
>
> It is often said among our villages that "Christ died for the truth." I am one of those who believe that if Christ died for the truth, and if one more has to die for the truth, well, here I am at your disposal [...]. One of my main tasks dear friends and in this way I take it upon myself, is to tell the truths I believe in, because the truth, the real truth, we Catholics know that God possesses it.

With a popular saying, Chávez summarised the soteriological meaning of Jesus's life: He died for the truth. And if it was necessary, within this salvation history, that another had to die for the truth as Christ did, then Chávez was ready for it. In this way Chávez placed himself in the role of Christ, or at least as a believer and follower. But as he was careful to notice, he was not just any Christian follower. He was a Catholic one and a true follower that would "speak the truths that I believe in."

Chávez included himself among the authentic believers in the Catholic Church, but excluded no one. Instead he called everyone to join "the war against the misery" in the country. The first institution he mentioned was the Catholic Church, and then he encouraged "the priests, the bishops" without the exception of anyone.

In some parts of the speech, Chávez demonstrated knowledge of religious sayings, popular as well as liturgical, which he let into his discourse and give new meanings to. But there was another idea in the speech that was not typical for popular Catholicism or mainstream Protestantism, neither historical nor Pentecostal versions of Protestantism: the interconnectedness of God's salvific work in Jesus's resurrection and political revolutions. This idea was

[43] Ibid., 11.

unique for liberation theology. Did Chávez borrow it from liberation theology, a pre-existent discourse that could provide a certain religious legitimacy for Chávez's juxtaposition of Christian salvation and leftist revolution?

What is evident, however, is that with the inaugural address to the nation the main religious elements in Chávez's political theology and populist narrative of the events in Venezuela were established. In this early phase of Chávez's presidency, everyone was given a rhetorical welcome to join Chávez's project and experience the resurrection in Venezuela's salvation history. But this is just the introductory chapter in a longer narrative.

Identifying the Enemies in the Divided Church

Chávez had seemingly treated everyone as friends in his first speech to his nation. The first months of governance were also characterised by harmony between the temporal and the spiritual powers, between the government and the Catholic Church that accounted for the majority of the population. The peace was not to last for long.

When Chávez invited the bishops to participate in the debate about the new constitution, Bishop Baltazar Porras responded on behalf of the bishops' conference that the church accepted the invitation but would be a "critical instance."[44] He underlined that the church could not take "arbitrary positions."[45] The controversies started on July 10, when Chávez tried to legitimise the constitutional process that was to end in a popular referendum the same year, claiming that "if Christ had been here now he would have voted for the Constitution."[46] Baltazar Porras responded the day after that Chávez's mix of power and biblical language was "a very dangerous cocktail."[47]

Chávez did not hesitate to answer. He initiated what would become his typical strategy of naming his enemies by insulting them one by one in public. Bishop Baltazar Porras became the first and was named "un diablo con sotana"; a devil wearing a cassock, that is the traditional garment worn by Catholic priests. Chávez had the enemies that he needed in the properly populist struggle for hegemony to create a frontier of exclusion that divided

[44] Smilde, "Christianity and Politics," 322.

[45] Francisco Jose Barrera Luis Bolet, "Iglesia Catolica Y Gobierno Venezolano En La Diatriba Publica: Estrategias Discursivas De Poder, Autodefensa Y Ataque," *Revista Signos* 37, no. 56 (2004): 12.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid., 13.

society into two camps.[48] One was for "the people" and the other for "the oligarchy," "the conservatives," or even, "the devil with a cassock."

Chávez's discourse on enemies also drew on biblical references. When he officially opened the Constitutional Assembly on June 23, he interpreted the Gospel story about Jesus in Jerusalem's Temple area within the contemporary political situation in Venezuela. As Jesus expelled the traders and salesmen from the Temple area, the people that went to the streets in Caracas to protest tried to expel "the thieves" and "the mafia" that had occupied "the Temple of the Fatherland": Venezuela.

> *…cuando Cristo entró en Jerusalén y se fue al Templo y tomó el látigo y sacó a latigazos a los mercaderes del Templo….Igual pasó aquí, el templo de la Patria fue tomado por los saqueadores, por mercaderes que lo convirtieron en un prostíbulo, y en una cueva de ladrones y de bandidos y de mafias. Por eso, también tuvo razón el pueblo cuando, ofuscado y cansado y sin conseguir salida, salió a las calles el 27 y 28 de febrero de 1989.*[49]
>
> …when Christ entered Jerusalem and went to the temple and took the whip and expelled with lashings the merchants from the Temple….The same happened here, our homeland's temple was taken by looters, by merchants who turned it into a brothel, and into a den of thieves, bandits, and mafia. Because of this, the people were also right when they, befuddled and tired and without a way out, took to the streets on February 27 and 28, 1989.

The enemies were identified and the unjust past commemorated with all its victims and martyrs. This also became characteristic of Chávez's discourse: to invoke the past in order to mobilise for the present, to reconstruct history in order to paint an image of unjust treatment of the heroes that had laid the foundation for Chávez's Boliviarian revolution. The protesters during the "Caracazo" in 1989, the founding fathers of Venezuela's independence from Spain in the nineteenth century, and Christ himself, were the heroes Chávez most often referred to in these speeches. The figures of Simon Bolívar and Christ would often blend together, as if they suffered the same destiny. By

[48] Laclau, *Populist Reason*, 81.
[49] Frías, *Selección De Discursos 1999*, 228.

this identification it was also possible to speak of "a Christian revolution"[50] that had begun with Christ, continued with Venezuela's founding fathers, and ended with the ongoing constitutional remaking.

The president won a crucial victory when the new constitution was supported by a majority of the voters in December 1999 after a broad, dynamic and unprecedented political process that expressed a wide range of social demands that had accumulated over a long period of time.[51] Nevertheless, the church was not content with the result. The bishops' conference criticised a number of proposals for the new constitution. These included the granting of equal rights to all religions, the enforcing of the state's role in education at the expense of educational agents like the Catholic Church, and the removal of anti-abortion laws from the constitution. In addition, Chávez's political style was characterised as anti-democratic.[52]

Chávez would make use of this criticism to attack the bishops and create an image of a divided church, consisting of friends and enemies of the nation. Interestingly, he usually avoided a discussion of the criticism itself. Instead he caricatured the content of the criticism in order to attack it or he explicitly mistrusted the motives behind the criticism. Confessing his Christian faith, his Catholic identity and his nearness to biblical stories, Chávez tirelessly tried to delegitimise the bishops' criticism in order to defend and legitimise himself. Though careful not to attack the global Catholic Church at this stage, represented by Pope John Paul II, Chávez met any criticism from a national ecclesial figure with polemics. Importantly, however, the president seemed always ready to argue from within the Christian tradition and not as an outsider to it. By claiming to be a true believer and be appealing to an authentic Christianity, he could himself make visible and enact this division within the Catholic Church.

This was illustrated when Chávez engaged in a polemic with the Vatican ambassador André Dupuy in the beginning of 2002. Dupuy expressed his "concerns" about "the negation and the excessive weakening of the others' rights," Chávez had already been confronted by this general and indirect critique of his regime when Pope John Paul II, in his encounter with the new ambassador from Venezuela in the Vatican in 2000, made the following statement: "A democracy without values converts itself into authoritarian-

[50] Ibid., 196.

[51] Levitsky and Roberts, *Resurgence*, 220.

[52] Smilde, "Christianity and Politics," 322–24.

ism." Several media interpreted this as a critique of Chávez's governance in Venezuela.[53] Chávez chose not to criticise the Pope, but instead let his ambassador assure the public that the Pope respected the Bolivarian Revolution while Dupuy, the well-skilled populist, did the opposite.

In his speech in front of the diplomatic corps with Dupuy among them, Chávez gave the Vatican nuncio a lecture about Venezuela's legal and moral right to sovereignty and the people's right to choose its own destiny, as if this was not respected by Dupuy. Then Chávez went on to explain to the Pope's ambassador how the Catholic hierarchy is "one of Venezuela's problems." The occasion this time was Cardinal Ignacio Velasco's public criticism of the role of four priests (among them Padre Vives Suriá) in a mass in memory of democracy's return to Venezuela in 1958 after the period of military rule. Chávez defended the priests and presented them as exemplary and true believers, in contrast to "others" that lived "with luxury and privilege," although Chávez did not name these priests. But according to the president there were "many" of them. To strengthen this critique of the hierarchy and the image of an internal division and battle between good and evil forces, Chávez told the diplomats that his mother always wanted him to be a priest and that he actually had "una inclinación especial por esa sotana" [an inclination towards the cassock].[54] If Chávez had become a priest he too would have been "condemned" by the cardinal as the four priests had been. He would have been condemned for nothing less than being a true follower of Christ, condemned for telling the truth. According to Chávez,

> *No sé si hubiera sido mejor cura que soldado, pero seguro que sería un cura rebelde, a lo mejor también me condenaría el Arzobispo y el Cardenal venezolano, Ignacio Velasco, me estaría condenado por decir la verdad. Por la verdad, murió Cristo, dicen los hombres y las mujeres en las calles. Los cristianos verdaderos decimos: por la verdad murió Cristo.*[55]

[53] Tudanca, R. C. "Tensas relaciones entre la Iglesia Católica y el Gobierno de Hugo Chávez en Venezuela 1999–2006," 8. *Simposio HIST/RI-2: La Historia reciente en Latinoamérica: encrucijadas y perspectivas.* Congreso Latinoamericano y Caribeño de Ciencias Sociales, 50 años de la FLACSO, 29–31 de octubre del 2007. Quito, Ecuador: 2007. http://www.reseau-amerique-latine.fr/ceisal-bruxelles/HIST-RI/HIST-RI-2-CONDE.pdf

[54] H.C. Frías, *Selección De Discursos Del Presidente De La República Bolivariana De Venezuela, Hugo Chávez Frías: 2002, Año De La Resistencia Antiimperialista* (Ediciones de la Presidencia de la República, 2005).

[55] Ibid., 139.

> I do not know if I would have been a better priest than a soldier, but for sure I would be a rebel priest, perhaps I would also be condemned by the Venezuelan Archbishop and Cardinal Ignacio Velasco, I would be condemned for telling the truth. Christ died for the truth, they say, the men and women in the streets. We, the true Christians, say: Christ died for the truth.

Here Chávez once again used the popular expression about the meaning of Christ's destiny. In addition to the image of the four solidary priests living with the people in contrast to the hierarchy living in "luxury" and "palaces," a dichotomist scheme was constructed not only of Chávez against the Cardinal, but of the Cardinal against Christ and the truth.

Chávez's appeal to biblical authority in the construction of his enemies was also evident in this speech, which contained one example of his repetitive use of the biblical trope of "Pharisees/hypocrites," stemming from Jesus's mouth in the gospels. In his response to the Vatican ambassador Dupuy in front of the diplomats, Chávez also employed this expression, but with a vague address, only suggesting that the enemies were in the room. Whoever the specific enemy was, the important point was to emphasize once again that the enemy existed in some or other form, that the enemy actually existed and was a constant threat to the Boliviarian project.

Notably, this expression was one of Chávez's most preferred biblical expressions in his official speeches throughout 2000, 2001, and 2002.

By meeting any critique from the bishops with theological reasoning or biblical allusions, Chávez could repeatedly represent himself as a Christian, a ruler with inspiration and authority from the Christian God. But he could also reinforce the impression of a divided church or Christianity where Chávez stood on the side of good. He believed in a "Cristianismo liberador" [liberating Christianity].[56] The subtext was that there was also an oppressive Christianity operating in the world, sometimes made explicit, for instance, when Chávez accused the bishops of having "dark interests."[57]

The image of a divided church is also upheld by liberation theology, most radically in Leonardo Boff's *Igreja e Poder*. In this book, Boff emphasises the

[56] Ibid., 309.

[57] R. C. Tudanca, "Tensas relaciones entre la Iglesia Católica y el Gobierno de Hugo Chávez en Venezuela 1999–2006," *Simposio HIST/RI-2: La Historia reciente en Latinoamérica: encrucijadas y perspectivas* (Congreso Latinoamericano y Caribeño de Ciencias Sociales, 50 años de la FLACSO, 29–31 de octubre del 2007; Quito, Ecuador: 2007), http://www.reseau-amerique-latine.fr/ceisal-bruxelles/HIST-RI/HIST-RI-2-CONDE.pdf, 6.

dual character of the church, one part orientated inwards to its powerful institutional structures and the other orientated outwards to the world and the poor.[58] What is more, Boff criticises the violation of human rights in a Catholic Church where priests are being punished with psychological torture, instead of the Inquisition's physical torture, for their theology.[59]

Chávez's recalling of tragic events and martyrs of the past—their use as a source of inspiration for the political struggle in the present—is also an important aspect of Latin American liberation theology, though it is more analytically elaborated than in Chávez's case. Still, when for instance the liberation theologian Jon Sobrino names the victims of the civil war in El Salvador "the crucified people," he is as concrete as Chávez arguably is in his application of this anamnesis. Nonetheless, Chávez's discourse clearly breaks with liberation theology in its strategy of demonizing political opponents. In liberation theology, the cosmological enemy is not to be identified with political or concrete ones. Liberation theologians would be very critical towards Chávez's demonizing rhetoric. Nonetheless, the tendency among some liberation theologians to name and identify enemies as "the rich" or "imperialism" reveals the theology's potential for demonization. And while liberation theology to a very limited extent could contribute to the credibility of this demonizing discourse, other Christian groups would be very familiar with various kinds of demonology. The existence of demons or supernatural evil forces has, after all, been fundamental to both Popular Catholicism as well as Pentecostalism. This indicates a wider basis for the credibility of Chávez's demonization.

The Cosmological Drama in the Boliviarian Revolution

Unsurprisingly, the metaphors used to portray Chávez's enemies increased between 2002 and 2004. This was, after all, the period marked by the military coup in April 2002. From 1999 to 2001 the nation and the people were of most concern to Chávez, since Chávez was preoccupied with rhetorically rebuilding the nation and distancing himself and his revolutions from previous governments.[60] In these efforts the centrality of the soteriological notion of "resurrection" could also be seen. This notion made it possible for Chávez to dramatize this distance between past governments and his revolution in

[58] Boff, *Church, Charism and Power*, 47.
[59] Ibid., 37.
[60] Moreno, "Metaphors."

cosmological terms. In his construction of "the people," Chávez would add soteriological meaning by investing even more in this notion through various speeches. His minimal Christology would be repeated and further elaborated. When comparing Christ to another national hero from Chávez's reconstructed history of Venezuela, Chávez added another meaning to Christ's death: "También llamaron loco a Jesús porque andaba defendiendo al pueblo y por eso lo crucificaron" [They also called Jesus crazy because he went around defending the people and for this reason they crucified him].[61] Christ not only died for the truth, but also because "he went around defending the people." Chávez described this defence in socioeconomic terms. The mission of Christ on earth was not only, or not even primarily, about a spiritual kingdom. Commenting on the United Nations Development Report, Chávez would interpret its data in light of the Kingdom of God in the Gospel:

> *Dice luego el reporte: Así mismo 83 países en los que habita el 70% de la población mundial, no están en vías de reducir en un 50% el número de personas que carecen de acceso al agua potable; casi 1.000 millones de personas siguen necesitando ese acceso. Lejos estamos del Reino de Dios, aquel por el cual vino Cristo hace 2.000 años a batallar y a morir.*[62]
>
> The report then says: Likeways, in the 83 countries that inhabit 70% of the world population, they are not on track to reduce by 50% the number of people without access to safe water; nearly 1 billion people still need that access. We are far from the Kingdom of God, that for which Christ came 2000 years ago to battle and die for.

The Kingdom for which Christ laid down his life was, according to Chávez's reasoning, implicitly a reality where there would be no poor in socioeconomic terms. Basic material needs would be met, such as access to clean water.

Still, Chávez would also make the opposite point: the revolution was not only material. In order to argue for this, Chávez several times referred to the

[61] H.C. Frías, *Selección De Discursos Del Presidente De La República Bolivariana De Venezuela, Hugo Chávez Frías: 2000, "Año De La Relegitimación De Poderes": Gobierno Bolivariano, Año 2* (Ediciones de la Presidencia de la República, 2005), 20.

[62] *Selección De Discursos Del Presidente De La República Bolivariana De Venezuela, Hugo Chávez Frías: 2001, Año De La Leyes Habilitantes : La Revolución Avanza a Paso De Vencedores* (Ediciones de la Presidencia de la República, 2005), 228.

story in the gospel of Matthew (4:1–11) about Jesus being tempted in the desert by the devil. Speaking about the integration of Latin American countries, Chávez retold the story in order to make the case that the integration should not only be reduced to commerce. The economic integration also needed a political dimension. If it had none, it would lose its "alma" [soul]:

> *Retomar, por qué no, las tesis de una unión política, de un bloque de fuerza política en Suramérica, porque si no la integración se quedaría solo como comercial. Aquí la mayoría, estoy seguro, somos católicos y cristianos y/o cristianos, y bien decía Cristo en aquel encuentro con el señor Satanás en el desierto cuando el diablo le dijo: "Tú eres Hijo de Dios y por qué no conviertes las piedras en pan para que comas, tienes hambre, estás en ayuna y andas muy flaco". Parece que el Hijo de Dios le dijo: "No, porque está escrito, no sólo de pan vive el hombre". Si le quitamos el alma a la integración nos quedamos sólo con el pan.*[63]
>
> Restate, why not, the thesis of a political union, a political bloc in South America, because otherwise the integration would end up as a commercial. The majority of us here, I am sure, are Catholics and Christians and/or Christians, and it was well said by Christ, when he met with Mr. Satan in the wilderness when the devil said to him, "You are the Son of God, why don't you transform the stones into bread for you to eat? You're hungry, you're fasting and you're thin." It seems that the Son of God said to him, "No, it is written, man lives not by bread alone." If we take away the soul of integration, we will have only the bread left.

If the Latin Americans were to co-operate only on an economic level, they would live "sólo de pan" [by bread alone], as Christ expressed so well, according to Chávez. But if the regional co-operation also acquired the meaning of a political union, then it would not merely live by bread alone. It would be in accordance with the meaning of Christ's words. That is to say, a deeper political integration would be in accordance with the divine will.

At other occasions, Chávez used the same biblical passage to express that he was "no materialist," in spite of being preoccupied with the economic condition of his people:

[63] Ibid., 209.

> *Cuando Cristo dice que no sólo de pan, también está diciendo que vive de pan, sin pan no vive, no sólo de pan, pero también vive de pan. Entonces nosotros seguiremos haciendo un esfuerzo, créanmelo así para cancelar deudas, para actualizar salarios hasta donde nos permita la situación económica del país porque no podemos olvidar los miles y miles de desempleados, de subempleados, de gente que gana menos del salario mínimo o el salario mínimo apenas. . . .*[64]
>
> When Christ says, "not by bread alone," he is also saying that man lives by bread, that without bread he does not live, not by bread alone, but he *also* lives by bread. Therefore we will continue to make an effort, believe me, to pay off debts, to update wages as far as the economic situation of the country permits it because we cannot forget the thousands and thousands of unemployed, underemployed people who earn less than the minimum wage or only the minimum wage. . . .

For Chávez the implication of Christ's exhortation not to live on bread alone was that Christ also emphasised that man actually lived on bread. Therefore Chávez worked to combat poverty with concrete actions. In this way Chávez established continuity between his political project and Christ's cause, what he considered God's will. On the surface, Chávez had used this biblical story in two different ways, first to emphasise the necessity of a spiritual dimension and then for the material aspect of reality. However, as much as he used the story to point in these different directions, the result was the same: the meaning of Christ's words included politics. They had a political meaning. The gospel was politicised and his own revolution Christianised.

This effect of the speeches was reinforced when Chávez continued to elaborate on the idea of a deep connection between resurrection and revolution. During his nation-centred speeches from 2000 to 2001 the message was not only that resurrection and revolution were interconnected or related. A new notion surfaced in Chávez's discourse: Christ himself had become a revolutionary.

> *Cuando yo estaba rezando el Padrenuestro y mirándole la cara a Cristo, ese gran revolucionario de todos los tiempos, estaba pen-*

[64] *Selección De Discursos Del Presidente De La República Bolivariana De Venezuela, Hugo Chávez Frías: 2003, "Año De La Contraofensiva Revolucionaria Y La Victoria Antiimperialista": Gobierno Bolivariano, Año 5* (Ediciones de la Presidencia de la República, 2005), 409–10.

> *sando que nosotros estamos todos como Cristo, como dice la oración que: "fue crucificado, muerto y sepultado, descendió a los infiernos y resucitó y subió a los cielos". Nosotros venimos resucitando de los infiernos. Venezuela estaba prácticamente en un infierno de pobreza, de hambre y de miseria y todavía tenemos mucho camino por andar para salir de los infiernos, pero estamos resucitando y precisamente, por el ejemplo de Zamora, por el ejemplo de Bolívar y por el ejemplo de ustedes y la unión de un pueblo es que se ha hecho posible esta resurrección bolivariana, esta revolución.*[65]
>
> When I was saying the Lord's Prayer and looking at the face of Christ, this greatest revolutionary of all times, I was thinking that we all are like Christ, as the prayer says: "He was crucified, dead and buried, descended into hell and rose and ascended into heaven." We come rising from hell. Venezuela was practically in a hell of poverty, hunger and misery and we still have a long way to go to get out of hell, but we are resurrecting and it is precisely through the example of Zamora, through the example of Bolívar and through your example and the union of a people that this Bolivarian resurrection, that this revolution was made possible.

Once again, Chávez staged himself as a pious, religious, and practising Christian. With this appearance Chávez described Christ as "this great revolutionary," a motif that would accompany his discourse for years. By declaring that the Bolivarian Revolution actually started with Christ, Chávez could give cosmological meaning to his already established polarising narrative with a Manichean divide between those who supported "the revolution" and those who were against it. The battle was not only between revolutionaries and conservatives, the people and the oligarchy. It was also a battle between heaven and hell, where the nation could assume the role of Christ and be resurrected. God was with Chávez, with the revolution and with the people. Moreover, in the presidential discourse this was a people that had accepted to assume the divine role.

In other words, Chávez's political theology energised a basic feature of populist discourse. It added cosmological value to Chávez's constructed social division in the antagonistic camp between the friend and the enemy.

[65] Frías, *Selección De Discursos 2000*, 32.

Although liberation theologians have not encouraged the populist personification of "the truth" or "the liberating Christianity," they have nevertheless shared the conviction that the true mission of the Christians is inescapably political on a continent where poverty and people's sufferings have first and foremost political causes. The view that Jesus defended his people and was historically executed for this cause held by Chávez can also be found in liberation theology. In liberationist Christology, Jesus's Kingdom is primarily for the poor on earth and socioeconomic poverty is a manifestation of the anti-Kingdom, the constellation of evil powers that manifest themselves in political, economic, and cultural structures; what liberation theology calls "structural sin." Another common characteristic between Chávez and liberation theology is their mode of understanding biblical texts as having sociopolitical implications that need to be actualised and contextualised in the present social and political situation in Latin America with the aim of carrying out concrete actions in favour of the oppressed masses.[66]

Given this proximity or affinity of Chávez's discourse to liberation theology, what kind of coincidence could this be said to be? Whereas Chávez tended to talk about the books he read and referred to leftist authors like Noam Chomsky or Eduardo Galeano, he did not refer to any book by a liberation theologian. If there is more than a coincidence, or rather an influence, could this indicate that the liberation theology that Chávez knew was the grassroots version, the "basista" discourse, which for instance was present in the sermons given by the parish priest from his adolescence?[67] If so, it could partly explain by what means Chávez achieved to bridge the gap between religion and politics, Christianity and leftist populism in such a successful way as to help to convince his electorate. On the other hand, it would also indicate the crucial role of liberation theology in the electoral success of perhaps the most central personal symbol of the political left in the region during the 2000s.

Radicalisation and Exportation

President Chávez did not refer to a concrete book by a liberation theologian. In spite of this he started to explicitly and publicly identity with the liberation

[66] Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Burns & Oates, 1987).

[67] Lehmann, *Struggle for the Spirit*, 97–111.

theology movement from 2004 and onward. This should be considered as part of a leftist reorientation or ideologization of his populist discourse.

Since 2002, Chávez's leadership had survived one coup d'état, a general strike lasting two months, and the opposition's recall referendum. The intensification of demonization in Chávez's discourse in this period was followed by a limited ideologization.

It seems significant as part of this new development in Chávez's speeches that in 2004 the president for the first time attempted to derive legitimacy not only from theological motives, but also from a historical figure that personalised the ascension, the solidarity, and martyrdom of liberation theology. While Chávez's political theology during the first years of his presidency would find resonance in a broad segment of Christians in Venezuela, from now on his theology carried clearer liberationist marks. With a stronger power basis in the country's electorate, Chávez could risk to narrow his Christian view and proclaim his adherence to a leftist and marginalized minority within Latin American Christianity: liberation theology. As *chavismo* gained hegemony, Chávez could take the risk to ideologise his discourse, politically as well as theologically.

On 24 March 2004, when speaking to students of medicine ready to go to Cuba to study, Chávez referred to Archbishop Óscar Romero. It was on that day 34 years earlier that the archbishop of El Salvador was murdered in a hospital chapel in the capital San Salvador:

> *Estaba recordando esta mañana que un día como hoy, en 1980, un grupo de terroristas contrarrevolucionarios dieron muerte a San Romero de América, aquel mártir salvadoreño, centroamericano, y nuestro, de esta América nuestra; aquel cura, aquel obispo, comprometido con las causas populares allá en El Salvador, Óscar Arnulfo Romero.*[68]
>
> I recalled this morning that this day in 1980 a group of counterrevolutionary terrorists killed Saint Romero of America, the Salvadoran martyr, Central American, and ours, from this our America. That priest, that bishop, committed to the popular causes there in El Salvador, Óscar Arnulfo Romero.

[68] H.C. Frías, *Selección De Discursos Del Presidente De La República Bolivariana De Venezuela, Hugo Chávez Frías: 2004, "Año De La Gran Victoria Popular Y Revolucionaria": Gobierno Bolivariano, Año 6* (Ediciones de la Presidencia de la República, 2005), 165.

Romero had entered into Chávez's lexicon of historical figures from the past worthy of being identified with the Boliviarian project. What was considered most worthy or adequate from Romero's theological discourse was the archbishop's own construction of "the people," his own "populism." In this way the Catholic martyr's legacy was more easily incorporated into the Boliviarian project:

> *Y precisamente como le llamamos San Romero de América, era un verdadero Pastor de Cristo. Óscar Arnulfo Romero dijo en uno de sus tantos sermones, de sus tantas orientaciones con la palabra, que el pecado fundamental -así lo definía el-: "El pecado fundamental, nuestro pecado fundamental, es ignorar a los pueblos, y más aún jugar con la esperanza de los pueblos". Y señalaba que el papel fundamental de los verdaderos pastores de Cristo debería ser señalar el pecado fundamental. Excluir, ignorar a un pueblo, y agregaba mucho más San Romero de América: "Ignorar a un pueblo es negarle, es sobre todo negarle sus derechos fundamentales".*[69]
>
> And just as we call him Saint Romero of America, he was a true shepherd of Christ. Óscar Arnulfo Romero said in one of his many sermons, one of his many teachings on the word, that the fundamental sin, he defined as this: "The fundamental sin, our fundamental sin is to ignore the people, and even more to play with the hope of the people." And he pointed out that the key role of the true shepherds of Christ should be to point to the fundamental sin: To exclude, to ignore a people. And he added much more, Saint Romero of America: "to ignore a people is to deny them, is above anything to deny them their fundamental rights."

It was significant that Chávez named the archbishop with the title "saint." By naming the martyr "San Romero" [Saint Romero], Chávez allied himself with the liberationist strand of Latin American Catholicism that has long since recognised Romero as a saint, though the Vatican had yet to canonise him as such.[70] Even more, Chávez once again appeared as a quasi-religious authority in the political field since he enacted like an ecclesial authority, canonising Romero as a saint. In this way, Chávez implicitly delegitimised

[69] Ibid.

[70] Romero was formally canonized on May 23, 2015, under Pope Francis.

the conservative bishops of the Venezuelan church whereas he himself used a supranational and regional Catholicism through the figure of Óscar Romero as a source of legitimacy.

Moreover, he could draw upon Romero's legacy when he quoted the Archbishop's definition of "the fundamental sin": "to ignore a people," that is, to "negate their fundamental rights." After describing Romero as "a true pastor of Christ," Chávez would go on to describe himself and his Bolivarian government, community and nation as resembling Romero and being "pastors of Christ." The semblance between Chávez himself and the martyr was established by Romero's own definition of sin. Chávez and his followers were like Romero because they fought in "the battle against the fundamental sin of exclusion and of ignoring the oppressed masses":

> *Hoy más que ayer San Romero de América sigue teniendo razón y aquí estamos nosotros luchando como pastores de Cristo y como pregoneros de la necesidad de esa batalla contra el pecado fundamental de la exclusión y del ignorar a las masas oprimidas de nuestros pueblos. Esa batalla para incluir a todos, esa batalla por redistribuir la riqueza de una nación como Venezuela.*[71]
>
> Today more than yesterday Saint Romero of America is still right and here we are fighting as shepherds of Christ and heralds of the need for battle against the fundamental sin of exclusion and of ignoring the oppressed masses of our peoples. That battle to include all, that battle to redistribute the wealth of a nation like Venezuela.

With Romero, Chávez could follow liberation theology and politicise yet another theological category: sin. The Bolivarian Revolution was no less than a continuous fight against the sin of humankind.

Still, the revolution was not yet as rigidly defined in political terms as other leftist political projects, as for instance the Cuban revolution. In this regard Chávez's appeal to a Catholic figure like Óscar Romero and theological ideas also helped to soften the image often portrayed of Chávez by his opponents: a dogmatic communist dictator. Chávez himself also stressed that he had not crossed the ideological Rubicon and turned into a communist or Marxist. Back in 2000 he swore that he was no Marxist, but still

[71] Frías, *Selección De Discursos 2004*, 165.

defended the Marxist thought in a way similar to liberation theologians that claimed to restrict their use of Marxism to an analysis of society.[72] Five years later, however, he signalled a new approximation to leftist ideologies such as Marxism. In January 2005, Chávez spoke about "the socialism for the 21st century" for the first time at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

Interestingly, this also radicalised his way of speaking about Christ. In front of a big audience at a football stadium in Argentina the same year Chávez's "revolutionary Christ" was described in more ideological terms than just as a predecessor of revolutions in Boliviarian or more general terms. While Judas Iscariot was "the first capitalist," the one who sold Christ for money, Christ had now become "the first socialist" in Chávez's discourse.[73] With this new elaboration or stretching of his Christology, Chávez ideologized Christ and popularised the Cuban revolution and its primary symbol of Fidel Castro at the same time. In this way he could derive legitimacy from both. When speaking about the alliance between Venezuela and Cuba, Chávez chose to highlight Fidel Castro's religious remarks as if there was something of a common Latin American religiosity in the communist atheist, as if to defend the political co-operation with the communist regime:

> *… yo sí creo en Dios, Fidel es ateo, pero Fidel Castro ¿Saben qué nombre le puso a una misión cubano-venezolana?: "Misión Milagro," porque en verdad me dijo un día por teléfono: "Chávez, esto parece un milagro." La última expresión que le oí es: "Dios ayuda a Chávez y a sus amigos."*[74]

> … I do believe in God, Fidel is an atheist, but Fidel Castro, do you know what name he gave to a Cuban-Venezuelan mission: "Miracle Mission," because in fact he told me one day on the

[72] "No, el marxismo es un método de pensamiento. La dialéctica ya existía como método, Marx la recoge y le da un contenido mucho más concreto para las luchas revolucionarias. Yo no soy marxista, pero también me escriben de por esos lados y leo de por esos lados." [No, Marxism is a method of thinking. The dialectic as a method existed, Marx captures it and gives it a much more concrete content for the revolutionary struggles. I am not a Marxist, but they also write me from those parts and they read me in those parts.] *Selección De Discursos 2000*, 271.

[73] *Selección De Discursos Del Presidente De La República Bolivariana De Venezuela, Hugo Chávez Frías: 2005, Año Del Salto Adelante : Hacia La Construcción Del Socialismo Del Siglo XXI* (Ediciones de la Presidencia de la República, 2005), 599.

[74] Ibid., 609.

> telephone: "Chávez, this seems like a miracle." The last expression I heard from him was "God helps Chávez and his friends."

Once again Chávez could perform and stage his own authentic religiosity, using the communist atheist as a deliberate and adequate contrast that made Chávez's own religiosity even more probable. He could approach the Cuban dictator in a similar way as the Brazilian Dominican Frei Betto did several decades ago with his famous book of dialogues about Christianity and religion:[75]

> *Y una noche yo le dije, mira Fidel vamos a hablar de Cristo, y me dijo: "Vamos, vamos a hablar". Y al final, después de varias horas me dijo: "Chávez, soy cristiano pero en lo social". Bueno, somos cristianos en lo social, la igualdad, la libertad: ¡Eso es socialismo! Cristo, lo repito, fue para mí el primer gran socialista de nuestra era; la libertad, la igualdad, la moral socialista de la que tanto habló el Che Guevara, de la que tanto ha hablado Fidel y cuántos otros.*[76]
>
> And one night I said, look Fidel, let's talk about Christ, and he said, "Come on, come on let's talk." And finally, after several hours he said: "Chávez, I'm a Christian but at the social level." Well, we are Christians on the social level, the equality, the freedom: This is socialism! Christ, I repeat, was for me the first great socialist of our time; the freedom, the equality, the socialist morality that Che Guevara spoke so much about, that Fidel has spoken so much about and many others.

By resorting to a Christian and religious definition of "socialism," Chávez could extend his strategy of not specifying what his socialism really was about. A certain ideologization had occurred in Chávez's populist discourse, but it was limited. "Socialism" had become a new placeholder or "'empty signifier' capable of unifying and mobilising, because everyone could understand it in terms of his or her own particular unsatisfied demands or aspirations."[77] For Chávez, socialism could be defined in vague categories and generalised

[75] Fidel Betto Castro, *Fidel Y La Religion: Conversaciones Con Frei Betto* (La Habana: Oficina de Publicaciones del Consejo de Estado, 1985).

[76] Frías, *Selección De Discursos 2005*, 611.

[77] Levitsky and Roberts, *Resurgence*, 226.

slogans like "equality" and "liberty": "la igualdad, la libertad: ¡Eso es socialismo!"[78] Part of this new mobilising signifier was the Christian God. Not only did Chávez try to mobilise on the basis of "socialism," but also on that of Christ "the socialist."

With at least some familiarity with liberation theology, Chávez would also know that this theological discourse had already laid some foundations for the legitimacy or probability of a "socialist Christ." Few liberation theologians had made this connection as intimate as Chávez did. Nevertheless, liberation theology had established the connection. For many, "the option for the poor" resulted in an option for socialism of a kind,[79] as the movement in Chile "Cristianos por el socialismo" or the Argentinian Montoneros guerrilla group in the 1970s demonstrated.[80]

One of the liberation theologians to draw this connection more explicitly than others was Leonardo Boff. The Brazilian became perhaps the most famous personalised symbol of liberation theology after Archbishop Óscar Romero when he entered into a conflict with the Vatican because of his ecclesiology in the 1980s. It was interestingly also in the context of defending his friendship with Fidel Castro and Venezuela's bilateral relation with Cuba that Chávez referred to Boff and for the first time used the signifier "liberation theology" in an official discourse. Despite Venezuela's exceptional abundance of oil resources, Chávez identified himself and his nation with "the poor" that "does not want to be rich" because of Christ's warnings in the gospels:

> *Además no queremos ser ricos, en eso Cristo nos dá una lección, ese Cristo nuestro: "Bienaventurados los pobres porque de ellos será el reino de los cielos" pero el reino de los cielos aquí, como dice muy bien la teología de la liberación, el reino de los cielos aquí en la tierra, aquí en nuestra realidad.*[81]
>
> Besides, we do not want to be rich, Christ gives us a lesson in that, our Christ: "Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," but the kingdom of heaven here, as liberation the-

[78] Frías, *Selección De Discursos 2005*, 611.

[79] José Ma Vigil and Leonardo Boff, *La Opción Por Los Pobres* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1991), 105–34.

[80] David Fernández, *La "Iglesia" Que Resistió a Pinochet: Historia, Desde La Fuente Oral, Del Chile Que No Puede Olvidarse* (Madrid: IEPALA, 1996), 91–104.

[81] Frías, *Selección De Discursos 2005*, 298.

> ology says well, the kingdom of heaven here on earth, here in our reality.

With a basis in liberation theology Chávez could now argue with greater religious legitimacy for a point he had made before: the Kingdom of Heaven was to be realised here on earth. After making this theological argument that might appear alien to the popular imagination, Chávez, perhaps carefully, avoided articulating any further controversial standpoints or original theological insights characteristic of liberation theology. Instead, he emphasised the continuity between a concrete liberation theologian like Leonardo Boff, liberation theologians in general, and Christ by demonstrating how they all are bearers of the same message from the Gospel:

> *Como lo dice ese gran brasileño Leonardo Boff por ejemplo y todos los teólogos de la liberación, Cristo liberador, y también dice Cristo aquello: "Más fácil será que un camello entre por el ojo de una aguja a que un rico entre al reino de los cielos" así que pobres como somos pero con un potencial que queremos compartir, porque estamos convencidos que: de la miseria, de la pobreza, del coloniaje, del subdesarrollo o salimos todos o no sale ninguno, sólo unidos podemos lograrlo, sólo unidos venceremos, sólo unidos lo lograremos.*[82]
>
> As that great Brazilian Leonardo Boff says, for example and all liberation theologians, Christ liberator, and Christ also says: "It will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven," so poor as we are, but with a potential that we want to share, because we are convinced that: either we will all leave the misery, poverty, colonialism, and underdevelopment, or else nobody will leave it, only together can we achieve it, only united will we overcome, only together will we achieve it.

By identifying himself as poor, Chávez achieved the status in the gospel as one who implicitly had already entered, or one who was allowed by God to enter, the Kingdom of God. Now the legitimacy of Chávez's Christianity derived not only from the staging of his own authentic reading of the gospel, but also from the legacy of liberation theology, from "all the theologians of liberation," as if they all had one unequivocal voice channelled through the

[82] Ibid., 298–99.

populist president, originating from the gospels' words about the rich (Matt 19:24/Mark 10:25/Luke 18:25).

One might think that Chávez's ideological shift was a threat against his popularity in a country where communism never had been a huge political force in the popular imagination. All the more, a relatively undetermined and largely religious definition of socialism proved useful, at the same time as Chávez could risk an ideological shift in his discourse, given his continuous and growing popularity. In this way, the shift in discourse did not necessarily reflect a shift in policy. We could rather regard it as an attempt at consolidating the power of the Chavista regime in Venezuela that was polarising but nonetheless popular in polls and elections. In December 2005, Chávez was elected for another six-year term. His victory was secured by no less than 7 million Venezuelans, winning 63% of the votes. Since his first time in office, Chávez and his movement had participated in eleven elections. Still it continued to increase its electoral base.[83] What kind of coincidence could there be between this political success and Chávez's political theology? How effective was this public and political theology in legitimising Chávez's hegemony?

Over the years, Boliviarian foreign policy became more aggressive on a rhetorical level in its efforts to promote a multipolar international order against the US superpower. The verbal confrontations and demonization of the president of the United States in the UN General Assembly in 2006 was a milestone and an effective manifestation of this. "Boliviarian" populism and its political theology were, however, exported to other global arenas as well. In May 2007, Pope Benedict XVI invoked the fifth CELAM conference in Fatima Aparecida, Brazil. As the former head of the Congregation of Faith that silenced Leonardo Boff, the Pope became as a cardinal the main symbol for the Vatican's marginalisation of liberation theology during John Paul II's papacy. As the Latin American bishops were gathered at the CELAM conference, the question about the role of liberation theology in the region was again raised in the media. Within this framework, Pope Benedict XVI as well as Chávez had already taken firm positions.

In one of his sermons in Fatima Aparecida, the Pope repeated his predecessor's strategy of making a general statement where he warned against authoritarianism in the region. Once again this was interpreted in the media as a warning against the Chavista regime. Chávez's strategy was to counter-

[83] Levitsky and Roberts, *Resurgence*, 225.

attack, where he accused the Pope of refusing to acknowledge "the Indian Holocaust" during colonisation. This was because the Pope's remarks on the evangelisation of America had already caused controversy in the media. Benedict XVI assured the Latin American public that the "the proclamation of Jesus and of his Gospel did not at any point involve an alienation of the pre-Columbian cultures, nor was it the imposition of a foreign culture."[84] Chávez did not restrict himself to secular language, but employed instead the biblical image of "Antichrist": "Christ came to America much later. He didn't arrive with Columbus, the anti-Christ came with Columbus."[85] In this way, Chávez did not even let the Pope define the true interpretation of Christianity and its role in history. Armed with his religious rhetoric, Chávez could challenge the Pope theologically.[86]

Chávez's verbal confrontation with the Pope in the media stood in notable contrast to his earlier attitude to the papacy, always avoiding any direct conflict with the former pope and instead praising him as "a good son of Christ."[87] In that earlier period, Chávez chose instead to invoke the papal authority to back his Bolivarian Revolution. It seemed now, with a new pope giving the same message about "authoritarianism" seven years after the former one, that Chávez could use the Pope more as an enemy than a friend. In this way his eight-year-long verbal conflict with the Catholic hierarchy transcended the national level and continued on the international stage. The primary symbol of the global Catholic Church had finally also become a target of Chávez's polarising discourse.

Three years later this culminated in an attempt to delegitimise more than the Pope's opinion about the evangelisation of the New World. This time Chávez's attack was directed against the papal authority itself, the ecclesial structure and its theological legitimacy:

> *No es ningún embajador de Cristo en la Tierra, como ellos dicen ¡por el amor de Dios! ¿Qué cosa es eso embajador de Cristo? Cristo*

[84] *Time Magazine*, July 24, 2007, http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1625275,00.html.

[85] Chris Carlson, "Venezuela's President Chavez Tells Pope to Apologize to Indigenous Peoples," *venezuelanalysis.com*, May 21, 2007, http://venezuelanalysis.com/news/2392.

[86] In July the same year, Chávez would officially back "Las Jornadas da la teologia de la liberacion," a meeting where profiled liberation theologians meet, and in this way reinforce his determined place within the intra-ecclesial tension or conflict between "liberationists" and conservatives in the Catholic Church, like Pope Benedict XVI.

[87] Frías, *Selección De Discursos 2001*, 446.

> *no necesita embajador. Cristo está en el pueblo. Cristo está en el pueblo y en los que luchamos por la justicia, por la liberación de los humildes, allí está Cristo, el verdadero, ése es Cristo.*[88]
>
> There is no ambassador of Christ on Earth, as they say. For the love of God! What's that thing, ambassador for Christ? Christ does not need an ambassador. Christ is in the people. Christ is in the people and in those who fight for justice, for the liberation of the poor; Christ is there, the true one, that one Christ.

Conclusion: From Delegitimacy to Legitimacy

The implication of the similarities outlined above is by no means that liberation theologians can be reduced to populists or that all liberation theologians welcome the use of their theology by populist politicians.[89] During Chávez's presidency in Venezuela this has been evident through the Jesuits' role in the dividing conflict between Chavistas and anti-Chavistas. Some religious groups, like the Neopentecostal churches, have taken a clear stand in support for Chávez while prominent Catholic bishops have stood against the president. Historically independent from the hierarchy in the Catholic Church, the Society of Jesus in Venezuela has distanced itself from the bishops' positions. This independent role became even more evident during the 2002 coup against Chávez. After several leading Jesuits had criticised Chávez publicly they used their network of radio stations to transmit alternative versions to those broadcast by other media supportive of the coup. When, for instance, these media reported that Chávez's cabinet members were unavailable because they were on the run, the Jesuits' network interviewed them in their homes about the coup.[90]

Furthermore, during the same year a group of eleven ecclesial base communities in Caracas sought to delegitimise the bishops' criticism of Chávez, without adhering to Chavismo. They rather criticised the bishops for speaking in their name without consulting them, the base of the church.[91] This

[88] The attack on the notion of the pope as God's ambassador on earth was enacted in diverse forms on various occasions.

[89] Yet several liberation theologians have expressed gratitude for Chávez's political role. See for instance the prayer for Hugo Chávez formulated by the Venezuelan Jesuit and liberation theologian Pedro Trigo, "Oración por Hugo Chávez, presidente de Venezuela," March 6, 2013, http://revistasic.gumilla.org/2013/oracion-por-hugo-chavez-presidente-de-venezuela/.

[90] Smilde, "Christianity and Politics," 326.

[91] Ibid., 327.

has, after all, been the basis of the communities' and liberation theology's legacy since its irruption into the religious-political field in the 1960s: to delegitimise the dominant political power. During the military regimes, this was evident in the persecution, imprisonment, and even execution of priests, nuns, and lay people from these groups. They were enemies of the dictatorial political power. Exceptions to this delegitimising role of liberation theology before the 2000s was to be found in its role during the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua in the 1980s and for the presidency of Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1953–) in the 1990s in Haiti. Elsewhere in the region there was little chance that powerful authorities would identify with these groups and appropriate their discourse.

This changed with the consolidation of liberal democracies and the resurgence of the political left. We have seen how Hugo Chávez is an instance of this. In his discourse there are no reservations against full identification with liberation theology and its ideas. The result is a total identification of some of liberation theology's main themes with the Bolivarian Revolution, without any limits, resulting in a discourse that bears theocratic marks and articulates a realised eschatology. In this discourse God's salvific work is already realised to a high degree. There are few eschatological reserves left in Chávez's speeches.

The danger of this politicisation and total identification of theological concepts with political realities was one of the reasons behind the Vatican's "instructions" on liberation theology, Rome's silencing of Leonardo Boff, and its general marginalisation of the ecclesial liberationist groups in the 1980s. But this type of politicisation was a danger that liberation theologians themselves became increasingly preoccupied with and utterly aware of. One of the clearest examples comes from its father, Gustavo Gutiérrez. In a notable moderation of some of the statements in the canonised founding book for liberation theology from 1971, Gutiérrez wrote firmly in 1990 that "the historical, political, liberating event is the growth of the Kingdom, is a salvific occurrence, but it is not the coming of the Kingdom, nor total salvation."[92]

Gutiérrez distanced himself from "overpoliticized or overconcretized versions of the Kingdom."[93] In theological terms, he maintained the crucial es-

[92] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 29.

[93] Lehmann, *Struggle for the Spirit*, 68.

chatological reserve that has been absent in Hugo Chávez's appropriation of liberationist themes.

Many observers have emphasised both liberation theology's failure to secure positions in the Catholic hierarchy and influence the official church, as well as its inability to gain hegemony among the poor and popular masses in Latin America. Nevertheless, liberation theology's institutional marginalization does not seem to exclude its relevance for political discourse. Therefore the sociologist Peter Beyer's affirmation of the movement's "meagre results"[94] appear somewhat precipitous.

Politicians' use of liberation theology falsifies or at least modifies this view of its "meagre" contemporary significance. Furthermore, Joseph Ratzinger's idea of a "twilight of the gods for that theology of redeeming political praxis" appears in this light to be a more a statement of desire than a depiction of reality. The rise of the new left in Latin America and its use of the "basista" or liberationist discourse and its translation into the political field, indicates a wider and neglected influence. It is time that we investigate the use of political theology among other politicians in Latin America, not only among ecclesial agents and religious activists, in order to recognise some of the impact of this theology.

[94] Beyer, *Religion and Globalization*, 157.