
Mapping Christology, Liberation, and Participation in Latin American Protestant Theology

A Trinitarian Proposal

The Christian faith endeavors to respond to the question of the identity and meaning of Jesus of Nazareth. Christology is an answer to the question. This volume examines the contours of Latin American Protestant Christology in explicitly Trinitarian terms in order to highlight how the historical dimension of salvation can be conceived as liberation.¹ Christian faith has historically maintained that in the

1. *Latin America* is a broad geopolitical term used to refer to the territories comprising the nation-states stretching from Mexico in the north, through Central America and the Caribbean, to Argentina and Chile in the south. The main language of the majority of these countries is Spanish, in addition to Portuguese in Brazil, French in the Caribbean, and the hundreds of languages represented in the many indigenous groups in each country. Latin America is a locus of *mestizaje*, the biological intermixing of the Spanish and Portuguese with the indigenous population during the colonization of the Americas. Politically, *mestizaje* translates into the sociocultural complexity of contested identities in the region in light of colonization and imperial systems that controlled it in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Hence, Latin America is “simultaneously and . . . ambiguously, at the core and periphery of the occidental world.” Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer, *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1996), 31–34. For a recent introduction to the history of Christianity in Latin America, see Ondina E. González and

history of Jesus Christ, humanity is brought to the horizon of the Trinitarian life, the salvific action of the triune God. Salvation is inextricably tied to the revelation of what God does in Jesus the Messiah of Israel to reconcile the world to Godself through the Holy Spirit. The historical dimension of salvation is the objective fact of faith that God liberates people (*from* fundamental sin *for* life as people of God) as they respond to the divine call. Salvation is in history but is not limited to history. The Christian experience of salvation can be conceptually construed from the biblical witness on at least three levels: as overcoming subjective negativity (redemption, liberation from sin, illumination); as flourishing in grace toward perfection and plenitude (sanctification, deification); and as the experience of a transforming reality that satisfies the deepest human longings for transcendence (conversion, hope of abundant life). Salvation, then, is the work of the Holy Trinity to bring people into communion with God and neighbor in anticipation of a new created order.²

In the Western theological tradition, the work of contemporary Christology arguably tends to concentrate on the nature and meaning of the person of Jesus Christ. But within this tradition in Latin American theology, Christology is often treated in conjunctive terms: in the articulation of the person and the work of Christ. Christology and soteriology are treated as a function of each other. The being and meaning of Jesus Christ as Son of God in communion with God the Father by the Holy Spirit is analytic in the concept of salvation.³

Justo L. González, *Christianity in Latin America: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

2. Christian theology speaks of salvation as the central need of humanity. The experience of salvation is not rendered as an ethical rule, a humanly attainable universal state of harmony, or a general utopia about the future state of affairs; salvation is a gracious divine act whereby humanity is brought into right communion with God and neighbor by being freed from the effects of sin. This communion, though, begins in the reality of historical experience. That is, even as unhindered communion with God and perfected human community await the eschatological new creation, salvation in the Scriptures is portrayed as one's being freed from the bondage of sin for the beginning of a new human life in the present, not only in the life after death. The word *salvation* is basic to all three senses. For an expansion of the dimensions of the concept of salvation and its biblical nuances, see Olegario González de Cardedal, *Fundamentos de cristología*, vol. 2, *Meta y misterio* (Madrid: BAC, 2006), lx–lxii.
3. Christology is the theological reflection that gives an account of the meaning and significance of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ of God through the narration of the facts of his particular life and the proposition of his universal and implicating truth. The central questions of Christology

The objective of this chapter is to locate the *status quaestionis* of Protestant christological production in Latin America. This will allow us to advance the constructive thesis of this book by identifying a major lacuna: the dogmatic in the literature.

The Focus: Protestant Latin American Christology

There are important doctrinal areas that have served as theological loci in Latin American theology. The various strands of liberation theology have made the adjective *liberation* not a doctrinal topic added to theological reflection but a way of characterizing, orienting, and shaping Christian theology in its multifarious dimensions. It is from this perspective that fundamental theology, ecclesiology, and the doctrine of the Trinity have been treated in this tradition. After all, Protestants, even before the developments of CELAM (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano) in Medellín, Colombia—widely considered as the formal preamble for Catholic liberation theology in the works of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan L. Segundo, and Leonardo Boff—had already developed an interest in orienting Christian theology toward a politically conscious ethos: theology that explicitly frames the Christian hope as the foundation of human struggles against inhuman political organization. The work of Rubem Alves in *A Theology of Human Hope*, published in 1969 (initially entitled *A Theology of Human Liberation*), is an influential preamble to liberationist thought in Protestant theology in the early 1970s.⁴

By the late 1970s, Christology was the theological locus that attracted more reflection among Protestants and Catholics. From the

are related to Jesus' life, actions, and relationship to God, as well as his identity, teaching, death, resurrection, and mission. In this task, the person and work, the being and function, the *Christus in se et Christus pro nobis*, are conceptually differentiable but materially and biblically inseparable. Conceptually, the differentiation is desirable for delving into the complexity and mystery of personal identity, but the work and agency also pertain to this unique, singular person, the Nazarene confessed as the historical incarnation of the Son of God. Being "in Christ," to use the Pauline formula, is not only about having our being in the God whom Christ revealed; it is also about "being in the work" of Christ. The ultimate aim of Christology is to know and participate in the life of Christ. This book focuses on the work of Christ as revelation of triune activity and the soteriological effects upon the community that confesses him as Lord: the church. Christology is inseparable from soteriology, and vice versa.

4. Rubem A. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope* (Washington, D.C.: Corpus, 1969).

theological outlines presented in the works of Juan L. Segundo, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, and second-generation liberation theologians such as Jon Sobrino, christological reflection found a vigorous reshaping.⁵ These theologians of liberation share a common soteriological orientation. The Christian concept of salvation includes not only present communion with God and the hope of life after death but also liberation from societal manifestations of sin in the present historical experience. Hence, while affirming a final eschatological salvation for humanity and creation with God, brought about only by divine action, liberation theologies insist upon the praxis of faith, an active pursuit of justice for the other. As the Catholic Episcopal Conference in Puebla, Mexico, pronounced in 1979, to think of salvation as integral liberation means to stress both the interior-personal aspect (liberation from personal sin) and the historical aspect (liberation from the concrete econo-socio-politico-cultural situation, characterized as “social sin”). However, critics have constantly pointed out that the communitarian dimension of sin takes precedence over personal sin in these theological works.⁶ The focus on the historical Jesus as the methodological priority in Christology and the hermeneutical framework of the perspective of the poor have characterized much of this theology as a Christology of ascent.

In the Protestant-evangelical tradition, christological reflection attends more to the tension between the historical and the transcendent dimensions of the Christ event, that is, between

5. Juan L. Segundo, *A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity*, vol. 3, *Our Idea of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1974); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988); Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978); and Jon Sobrino, *Cristología desde América Latina: Esbozo a partir del seguimiento del Jesús histórico*, 2nd ed., Colección Teología Latinoamericana (Mexico City: CRT, 1977); *Jesucristo liberador: Lectura histórico-teológica de Jesus de Nazaret* (Madrid: Trotta, 1991); *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001). For an overview of the movement and its relationship to conciliar Catholic theology, see Rosino Gibellini, *La Teología del siglo XX*, Colección Presencia Teológica (Santander, Spain: Sal Terrae, 1998), chaps. 12, 15.

6. This is a key objection raised by the Roman Catholic magisterium and Protestants in Latin America. For a sympathetic but critical Protestant engagement, see José Míguez Bonino, *La fe en busca de eficacia: Una interpretación de la reflexión teológica latinoamericana de liberación* (Salamanca, Spain: Sígueme, 1977); Emilio A. Núñez, *Teología de la liberación: Una perspectiva evangélica* (Miami: Caribe, 1986); Emilio A. Núñez and William D. Taylor, *Crisis and Hope in Latin America: An Evangelical Perspective*, rev. ed. (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1996).

atonement and resurrection, praxis and hope, present transformation and eschatological salvation. This christological work is more a Christology of descent. In the publications of the Latin American Theological Fellowship (Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana, or FTL), as represented in the work of one of its founders, C. René Padilla, the *solas* of the Protestant Reformation—*sola Scriptura, solus Christus, sola Gratia, sola Fide*—provide a hermeneutical basis for theology, even as particular attention is paid to the meaning and exercise of a situated Christian praxis.⁷

However, in the Catholic-liberationist, and more so in the Protestant, tradition, a deficit emerges: a lack of elaboration of the christological article with explicit attention to the action of the triune God in Jesus of Nazareth and its relation to the historical experience of salvation. Latin American scholars such as José Míguez Bonino, Nancy Bedford, Guillermo Hansen, and Antonio González have recently highlighted this deficiency in Christology. In the context of Latino theology in the United States, Cuban theologian Justo González makes a similar observation.⁸ And in Europe, Jacques Dupuis and Christoph Schwöbel have called attention to the bearing that Trinitarian theology should have in Christology and soteriology.⁹

7. Countries represented in the membership of the FTL include Chile, Brazil, Colombia, Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Peru, Panama, Guatemala, Mexico, the United States, Canada, and the Dominican Republic. For a detailed historical account of the formation of the LTF, see Daniel Salinas, *Latin American Evangelical Theology in the 1970's: The Golden Decade*, Religion in the Americas Series (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2009). Two of the founding members of the FTL have endeavored to produce christological contributions that are contextual, in the heritage of the Protestant Reformation, while attending to social, political, and missiological issues. However, none of them have significantly tackled the Trinitarian dimension of Christology. See C. René Padilla, *Mission between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985); "Christology and Mission in the Two Thirds World," in *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World: Evangelical Christologies from Contexts of Poverty, Powerlessness and Religious Pluralism; The Papers of the First Conference of Evangelical Mission Theologians from the Two Thirds World, Bangkok, Thailand, March 22-25, 1982*, ed. Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983); "Toward a Contextual Christology from Latin America," in *Conflict and Context: Hermeneutics in the Americas*, ed. Mark Lau Branson and C. René Padilla (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 81-91; "Evangelical Theology in Latin American Contexts," in *Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 259-73. See also Samuel Escobar, "Evangelical Theology in Latin America: The Development of a Missiological Christology," *Missiology* 19, no. 3 (July 1991): 315-32.

8. Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1990), chap. 7.

9. This systematic concern with the development of a Trinitarian Christology arguably began in the European region early in the twentieth century, starting with Swiss Reformed theologian

***Status Quaestionis*: Christology in Contextual Perspective**

The following review of literature focuses on representative contemporary accounts of the relationship of Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity in Catholic and Protestant theologies.

Catholic Liberation Christology and Trinitarian Thought

In his analysis of the doctrine of the Trinity in Latin American liberation theology, Guillermo Hansen argues that Gustavo Gutiérrez and Juan L. Segundo “outlined the contours of a theology of liberation, primarily constituted [as] an endeavor to understand the historical reality of the Latin American continent within the salvific process entailed by a triune conception of God.”¹⁰ However, despite the efforts to develop a christological hermeneutic and a concomitant theological ethics, liberation theology still carries a Trinitarian deficit. Not that the Trinitarian dogma is ignored; the works of Gutiérrez, Segundo, and Boff evince the potential fruitfulness that Trinitarian dogmatic elaboration has in this tradition.¹¹ But, as Hansen argues, what hinders the development of a full theological and biblical account of the Trinitarian grounding of liberation theology and its Christology is “an inflated anthropological extrapolation from the economic dimension pertaining to the hypostatic signification of the Son” which leads to a “reduction of God’s *ousia* (love) and to the wedge driven between the identity of the hypostatic mediator (Christ) and the mediated

Karl Barth, and afterward with the work of German Protestant Jurgen Moltmann. More recently, the German Christopher Schwöbel and the Belgian Jesuit priest Jacques Dupuis have stated the challenge of keeping the work of Christology on Trinitarian grounds. See Jacques Dupuis, *Who Do You Say I Am?: Introduction to Christology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994); Paul D. Jones, *The Humanity of Christ: Christology in Karl Barth’s “Church Dogmatics”* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008); Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1990); Christoph Schwöbel, “Christ and the Spirit: Spirit-Christology in Trinitarian Perspective,” *Theology* 98, no. 781 (1995): 52–54; and Christoph Schwöbel, “Christology and Trinitarian Thought,” in *Trinitarian Theology Today*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 113–46.

10. Guillermo C. Hansen, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and Liberation Theology: A Study of the Trinitarian Doctrine and Its Place in Latin American Liberation Theology” (PhD diss., Lutheran School of Theology, 1994), 495.

11. See Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*; and Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns, Theology and Liberation Series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988).

(salvation).”¹² Even though the theme of God and the divine’s relationship to history, specifically to the poor in history, abound in liberation thought, the Trinitarian explication brought to bear on the christological article did not significantly exceed the basic contours of Vatican II conciliar theology. And although the concentration on the historical Jesus brings this theology near the door of Trinitarian dogmatics, it stays shy of entering it. The reason for this is the strong emphasis on the historical immanence of God, which limited articulation and recourse to the metaphysical and transcendent dimensions of the Christ event.

Matthew Lundberg, in a recent dissertation, argues along these lines that Jon Sobrino’s Christology, even as it is the most mature liberationist account, is hindered by the lack of an explicit elaboration of the immanent Trinity as the fundamental presupposition of a Christology that seeks to give an account of that which is salvific in the Christ event. Even as Sobrino in his *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims* emphasizes the meaning and relevance of Jesus’ life through a stauological motif and his relationality with God, he nevertheless fails to connect this fully with Trinitarian doctrine. Lundberg’s project intends to provide a solution to this lacuna in Sobrino’s Christology by suggesting how such Christology gains coherence and unity under a Trinitarian framework.¹³

Protestant Christology and Trinitarian Thought

In contrast to these Catholic liberation theologians, Protestants have yet to produce a monograph-length work on Christology or the Trinity in Latin America. Recent research on Protestant theology in Latin America has sidestepped focused treatments of these doctrines. If formal christological reflection is treated, it is by way of association with other themes. What we find in recent research is schematic

12. Hansen, "Doctrine of the Trinity and Liberation Theology," 496.

13. Matthew D. Lundberg, "The Immanent Trinity as Mystery of Liberation: A Trinitarian Examination of Jon Sobrino’s Christology" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2005). See also Gerardo A. Alfaro-González, "Analysis and Evaluation of the Historical Jesus in the Christology of Jon Sobrino" (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2000).

proposals in ecclesiology, missiology, pneumatology, history of theology, biblical motifs, hermeneutics, and the systematic potential of the theology that emerges from evangelical theologians associated with the FTL.¹⁴ An exception to this trend is the recent work of David del Salto. In his dissertation, “The Promise of a Trinitarian Christology for the Latin American Evangelical Church,” Salto appropriates Míguez Bonino’s proposal that Protestant theology should move to develop its Christology in Trinitarian terms. Suggesting its implication for Christology and church praxis, Salto follows Boff’s argument that a social model of the Trinity is the most apt for the Christian doctrine of God. The aim of his project is to bring coherence to the unfinished works of two important theological voices in Latin America: missiologist Orlando Costas and theologian C. René Padilla (also a founder of the FTL).

The approach of my book will be different on several grounds. Recourse to a social model of the Trinitarian relations, as construed by Boff (who follows Jürgen Moltmann), does not seem that promising for Christology, given that the operating theological category, *perichoresis*, is transferred from a theocentric category to an anthropological one.¹⁵ Still, Salto rightly points out that Protestant-evangelical theological production has in fact moved toward a more robust Christology by

14. Dieumeme E. Noelliste, “The Church and Human Emancipation: A Critical Comparison of Liberation Theology and the Latin American Theological Fraternity” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1987); Ricardo Gomez, “The Mission of God in Latin America: Redefining the Theology and Practice of the Church Based on Luke-Acts” (PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2006); Oscar A. Campos, “The Mission of the Church and the Kingdom of God in Latin America” (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2000). Angel Daniel Santiago-Vendrell, “Contextual Theology and Revolutionary Transformation: The Missiology of M. Richard Shaull, 1942–2002” (PhD diss., Boston University School of Theology, 2008); Mark R. McClellan, “Pneumatology and Liberation in Latin America: An Analysis of the Nature and Work of the Holy Spirit in the Theologies of Orlando E. Costas and José Comblin” (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2000); Salinas, *Latin American Evangelical Theology*; Terrell Frank Coy, “Incarnation and the Kingdom of God: The Political Theologies of Orlando Costas, C. René Padilla, and Samuel Escobar” (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1999); Mariano Arteaga Avila, “Towards a Latin American Contextual Hermeneutics: A Critical Examination of the Contextual Hermeneutics of the *Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana*” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1996); Sharon E. Heaney, *Contextual Theology for Latin America: Liberation Themes in Evangelical Perspective*, Paternoster Theological Monographs (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

15. See Karen Kilby, “Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity,” *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 965 (2000): 432–45.