

Progressive Catholicism in Latin America and Europe 1950s–1980s

Social Movements and Transnational Encounters

CALL FOR PAPERS



Dom Hélder Pessoa Câmara visiting the Belgian Christian labor movement, Geel, December 1978.
(KADOC KFB2735)

Starting in the mid-to-late 1950s, a new paradigm of theological ideas and political action began to emerge. Profoundly affected by ferment at the grassroots of Latin American societies, but likewise influenced by new theologies and apostolic practices developed in Europe in earlier years, Catholic activists began to challenge traditional authorities. The new course emphasized the central role of the laity and a principled engagement on behalf of the socially disadvantaged and the poor. Meaningful – though not uncritical – dialogue with Marxist intellectuals and activist currents led to close cooperation and exchange with secular social movements and radical circles.

The moment in which these fledgling and ebullient forces first broke through the surface and made international headline news can be located with relative ease as 1968. The conclusions at the Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín (August/September 1968) were famously influenced by liberation theology, while secular and religious movements around the world engaged in open defiance of the status quo throughout 1968 and in subsequent years. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, liberation theology continued to inspire a plethora of connections between Europe – East and West – and Latin America, ranging from solidarity and human rights movements (e.g. on behalf of Chile,

Argentina and Central America) to scientific, cultural, political and religious networks. Figures such as Hélder Câmara, Ernesto Cardenal and Adolfo Pérez Esquivel gained an iconic status in Europe and stirred the fascination with Latin America and progressive Catholicism among broad audiences. Even though a substantial amount of research has already been carried out, this field of research has to date remained relatively neglected.

This conference on progressive Catholicism in Latin America and Europe, organized on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of 1968, intends to investigate and cast new light on the transnational transfer of ideas and encounters between religious and secular progressive movements on both sides of the Atlantic during the period ranging from the 1950s to the 1980s. Critically, it wants to assess the role of progressive Catholicism in the broader context of expanding social and cultural relations between Latin America and Europe, and to stress its relevance to other burgeoning research fields, such as the history of “1968”, human rights, transnational activism, and the Cold War. The question of transcontinental interaction and crossover is the main focus of this conference and leads to the following themes, a list that is intended only as indicative and by no means exhaustive:

NETWORKS

Which factors caused this remarkable confluence of progressive ideas and activist currents within both religious and secular circles? How did Latin American grassroots ferment reach a wider European audience in the course of the 1960s? How did liberation theology, political theology, etc., affect secular debates and milieus? In what way did the experiences and discussions inside secular movements make major inroads into Catholic communities? Were there particular nodal points of cross-cultural interaction (e.g. Leuven, Brazil, Chile, Spain, Paris), which played crucial roles in this process of the transfer of ideas? Which sections of the Catholic lifeworld (e.g. Catholic Action, Specialized Catholic Action, base communities, parish priests) were most affected by these trends? What was, in other words, the geography of progressive Catholicism? Were contacts between Latin America and Europe embedded in wider global connections that also spanned other regions, such as Africa and Asia?

SECULAR AND/OR RELIGIOUS?

What tension was there between changing the world and changing religion? What were the strategies and goals of progressive Catholicism? What was its relationship with “secular” forms of political organization and ideology, such as Marxism, liberal democracy, and human rights? How did progressive Catholicism interact with armed resistance and national liberation movements?

IMPACT AND OPPOSITION

How and why did liberation theology, political theology, etc., affect secular debates and milieus, and even political transition? What was its impact on social movements in Latin America and Europe, such as trade union movements or NGOs? What elements did inspire the conservative backlash to the emergence of progressive Catholicism? Was there in this respect a difference between the 1960s, the 1970s and the 1980s – when pope John Paul II and the Second Cold War contributed to a growing polarization with regard to liberation theology? How was progressive Catholicism embraced and opposed by political groups, such as Christian Democracy, and to what degree was it part of a broader cultural and political history of the Cold War?

ENCOUNTERS AND DISTANCE

To what extent was the Church and progressive Catholicism conducive to cooperation between Latin American and European social movements? How did people on both sides perceive each other? What was the impact of pre-existing cultural stereotypes and older notions of “otherness”? How did political, geographical and cultural borders create new fissures, and to what extent were these bridged by religion or other factors and concerns, such as human rights, democracy, anti-Americanism, and common opposition against dictatorship? What countries and issues were the “blind spots” in the mental maps of progressive Catholics?

We are seeking to assemble a critical mass of researchers actively engaged with such questions and focusing on networks and encounters to elaborate new answers to the questions associated with these themes. A small number of invited keynote presentations will be coupled with an array of more detailed research papers. We explicitly wish to go beyond a ‘mere’ theological focus on the events under investigation, and we thus encourage historians and other social scientists centrally to contribute to this event. We invite contributions which address relevant topics from the mid-1950s to the early 1980s.

PARTNERS

KADOC-KU Leuven, Documentation and Research Centre on Religion, Culture and Society
Centre for Liberation Theologies, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven
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ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

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SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

Wilhelm Damberg | Henk De Smaele | Susana Monreal | Peter Van Dam | Paul Wynants | Massimo di Giuseppe | Denis Pelletier | Miranda Lida

TIMING

Call for Papers: February 2017
Deadline for proposal submission: 1 June 2017
Notification of acceptance: 15 September 2017
Deadline for Papers: 15 April 2018
Workshop: 27-29 May 2018

VENUE

The evening of Sunday 27 until Tuesday 29 May, Irish College Leuven.

The conference language will be English. A budget for travel and accommodation is provided for participants who have no internal funding.

PAPER PROPOSALS

Please send your paper proposal to peter.heyрман@kuleuven.be before 1 June 2017.

It should be submitted as a PDF document and contain:

- a clear title of the envisaged paper
- a summary (max. 500 words), outlining the paper’s goals, methodology and sources
- CV of author(s), with contact information, position and institutional affiliation

You should receive confirmation of receipt of your proposal within 48 hours.

The proposals will be evaluated and selected by the Scientific Committee based on topic relevance, innovativeness and the degree to which the proposal answers the call. The organizers will also strive towards a good geographical balance.

Notification of acceptance will occur no later than 15 September 2017.

For further questions, please contact:

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