

Christianity and Alternative Education in El Salvador: Challenging the State

by

Jasmine Subasat

Abstract

This paper highlights the alternative “non-formal” education implemented by the Catholic Church before and during the civil war in El Salvador. A radical faction of the Catholic Church spoke out about the social injustice prevalent in the country and created Christian Base Communities in rural areas where people had been excluded from formal education since the 1960s. The movement of popular education emerged in the 1970s. It was political education espousing liberation theology which countered the traditional and dominant education provided by the state. It taught not only how to read letters but also how to read the world in which the poor lived.

Introduction

Nothing is as important to the Church as human life, especially the lives of the poor and the oppressed. Jesus said that whatever is done to the poor is done to him. This bloodshed, these deaths, are beyond all politics. They touch the very heart of God.

Archbishop Oscar Romero, 16 March 1980

(Wright et al 1990: 15)

El Salvador has suffered a long history of oppression by the state which represented a minority elite population, resulting in the poor long being deprived of formal education. To fill the gap that the state created, the Church has actively provided the poor with education since the 1960s. This paper highlights this alternative “non-formal” education implemented

by the Church and popular organisations. The movement emerged in the 1960s to 1970s when the discontented population started to express their feelings against the state's repression, and social and economic inequality. This coincided with the break-up of the dictatorship and the beginning of the industrialisation era.

When alternative conceptions of education deployed by the popular movements led by the counter-state agencies challenge the dominant cultural meanings, as Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar (1998: 7) state, they 'enact a cultural politics.' Powerful rulers or oppressors used education as a tool to create a particular type of people either by preventing access or by providing a specific type of education and to reproduce domination and hegemony. Counter to this, the alternative education advocated by the popular sector, articulates the knowledge of the oppressed and teaches political aspects of education, and thus, seeks to redefine social power. This is called "popular education" or "educación popular"¹

In the popular education movement in Latin America and El Salvador, the Roman Catholic Church played a pivotal role alongside the popular classes and intellectuals. The Church that supports the movement is often distinguished as the "Popular" Church, as opposed to the "established" church (Kane 2001). This radical faction of the Church in support of the popular sector emerged in the 1960s. Many radical priests throughout Latin America have been active in adult education, such as Leonardo Boff of Brazil², Camilo Torres of Colombia and Gustavo Gutiérrez of Peru (Riding 1981). They have proposed a "Liberation Theology" that serves the poor. Popular education and liberation theology, therefore, are not separable in the contexts of Latin America and many church workers have taught popular education. As a theoretical base, both are influenced by Marxism. In El Salvador, both contributed to the political education of the *campesinos*³.

This article, first, briefly outlines the background of El Salvador in relation to education, drawing particularly on the social injustice created by its history. Second, popular education in the Salvadoran context is explained. It is opposed to formal education that is the state's

¹ Since the meaning of "popular" in Spanish and Portuguese has political connotations not only the people but also the working class or the poor, the English words do not deliver its very meaning. This article, however, utilises the English words for its convenience and uniformity.

² Although Boff is no longer a priest, he remains a theologian and scholar after the Roman Catholic Church deprived him of his title on the basis of his radicalism in 2000.

³ This term is often translated as peasants in English. According to Jary and Jary (2000: 449), peasants are 'politically, economically and socially subordinated to nonpeasant groups against whom they have devised various methods of resistance, rebellion or revolt.'

own, embracing traditional and dominant education in the components of its pedagogy. Third, the major actor of popular education, the radical Catholic Church, is discussed followed by liberation theology which disseminated popular education through Christian Base communities (CEB).

El Salvador and its Education

Salvadoran history is dominated by social and economic injustice based first on colonialism by the Spaniards and later on internal colonialism by other European descendents who ruled the country. After the Spaniards colonised Central America, the indigenous population worked for the feudal landlords of the European immigrants. The social structure created by the history strongly restricted the majority of *campesinos* from having access to the formal education system⁴. Education was available only for the rich and urban areas. Up until the 1950s formal education was limited to urban middle classes and, for the poorer urban children, apprenticeship provided most of the country's technical and vocational training (Blutstein et al. 1971). Urban workers learnt in informal night schools created by guilds of shoemakers, tailors, printers and blacksmiths and also in "the University of the People", which offered weekly lectures on issues such as health, education, politics and workers' rights (Boland 2001).

School expansion came along with industrialisation and the emergence of the urban middle class in the late 1950s. By the 1960s there were some schools in urban areas and the teachers union was established in 1965. The government did not invest enough in education and often responded with violence to the demand of the union. Inequality was the cause of the conflict and education 'has always been a low government spending priority, with the oligarchy preferring to send their children to private schools and then universities abroad' (Thomson 1986: 71). In 1968, after several major strikes, the government agreed to build primary schools that offered teaching up to the sixth grade, which was the highest level of primary education in rural areas (Blutstein et al. 1971). In 1970, while nearly 40 per cent of school-aged children were enrolled in primary school, only one in five finished the sixth

⁴ Education was limited to European descendents, and it reached a minuscule proportion of the population during the 19th century. It was also a government policy to limit educational reforms (Boland 2001) so that the poor, especially *campesinos*, could not have access to education. In 1900, the literacy rate in the country was no more than 30 per cent, and it often approached zero per cent in the rural districts (Montgomery 1995).

grade (ibid.). Despite insufficient education reforms, establishing primary schools in rural areas was a necessary step, as there were virtually no schools in the past.

In the 1970s, almost 62 per cent of urban students reached the ninth grade, which was the last grade of secondary education, whereas less than six per cent of rural students did so (Boland 2001). Only one per cent of the country's total enrolment at the upper-secondary level⁵ came from rural areas (ibid.). This was partly due to shortages of teachers and secondary schools in the countryside. The wide gap was between urban and rural and girls and boys. The rate of non-literate girls was twice as high as boys and the dropout rates were extremely high, especially for girls, 'who were forced by circumstances to seek employment as fieldworkers or domestic servants, or who had to stay home and help care for their siblings' (ibid.: 74). There were few schools available in rural areas before the civil war and it was only after the civil war when more schools became available in rural areas.

The civil war which started in 1980 was caused fundamentally by structural inequality manifested in terms of land, wealth and education. The educational system became a battleground in the civil war, since students and teachers stood at the forefront of social movements and revolutionary action (Murray and Barry 1995). During the civil war, most schools in rural areas were destroyed, and popular education, which is also known as political education, taught *campesinos* to enter the armed struggle as well as compensating for the failure of the state to provide education. The major actor of popular education was the Church, FMLN (the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), a left-wing political party and former revolutionary guerrilla organisation and teachers who were the members of the union.

After the end of the civil war in 1992 the Salvadoran education system has become more democratic and primary education has become compulsory. However, there is still a huge gap between rural and urban areas and girls and boys.

Popular Education in El Salvador

"Popular education", which was developed in Latin America in the 1960s (Kane 2001), emerged as an alternative to the education provided by the state as a part of social movements that expressed the interests of the popular classes. In many parts of Latin America the poor had been strategically kept from formal education resulting in exclusion of the poor and indigenous people and privileging of the rich. Popular education is education for, of and by the people, who consist of the majority of the population. It not only stresses

⁵ After three years of secondary education, there are two more years for those who seek higher education. This is known as upper-secondary level.

the point that education should be distributed to all of the population in a country, but also that education should be reformed in such a way that people understand their living situations, such as oppression or poverty, by gaining analytical skills.

Paulo Freire systematised the methodology of popular education in his book, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", whose theory of learning, based on critical thinking claims that the learner could analyse his or her harsh living realities and understand the causes of them. Freire (1992: 39) states that 'here is one of the central questions of popular education – that of language as a route to the invention of citizenship' meaning that the voiceless could become citizens through popular education. Popular education in Latin America, and El Salvador in particular, where the civil war took place, has therefore been significant as a political project. Popular education is inclined to occur outside the framework of the formal education, being categorised as "non-formal education." While formal education implies education chiefly for children, non-formal education tends to involve mainly adults⁶. This is mostly because non-formal education focuses on the provision of education to those who could not have formal education, due to unfavourable political and economic circumstances⁷.

Popular education has long roots in Salvadoran reality. It was the "popular church", inspired by the popular movements that emerged in the 1960s, which initiated popular education in El Salvador. It was born in conditions both of cultural deprivation by the state, which limited education to the poor, by deliberately preventing access; and of scarcity, in which education was limited by poverty and the civil war. Popular education was developed for the popular classes by the radical faction of the Catholic Church, professionals, intellectuals and *campesinos*. It grew in places such as the CEBs, student movements, peasant organisations, village "*directivas*" (councils), refugee camps, prisons, and the wartime establishment of popular schools in the conflict zones. They were all part of the

⁶ The definition and concept of adults may also vary from country to country. In many countries adults would include teenagers as they may start forming families at the age of fifteen, sixteen or even earlier. Moreover, women are more likely to become "adults" earlier than men, as many women have children when they are still adolescent. In El Salvador, particularly in rural areas, some girls become pregnant in their early teens, and usually stop going to school if they were even attending at the time. In this context, popular education could be crucial for women's development where women have less access to education compared to men.

⁷ This is a point where the concepts of the non-formal education and "adult education" overlap, although adult education represents a more recent concept and by and large is compensatory education (Torres 1990).

grassroots mobilisation and education of the Salvadoran popular sector, an option explicitly offering an alternative project for the liberation of the oppressed classes.

It is important to note that there are two meanings of popular education in El Salvador. The first meaning is as discussed earlier, which consists of a radical alternative methodology opposed to formal and traditional education. It holds some emancipatory visions, which are based on Freire's ideas; for example, education is not seen as a neutral tool but as having the potential to either liberate or control a person. Education in order to liberate learners, therefore, should reject the 'banking concept' of teaching, in which the students become mere recipients of knowledge provided by teachers. Accordingly, it encourages active participation of the learners and development of critical consciousness known as conscientisation. In other words, popular education is empowering both in its methodology and philosophy.

The second meaning of popular education is alternative schools and classes held during the war. In conflict zones such as eastern Chalatenango and northern Morazán, education relied on large numbers of volunteer teachers mostly from the communities (Murray and Barry 1995). These teachers themselves had neither completed primary education nor had any theoretical base of Freirean methodology and popular education. These teachers called themselves "popular teachers" and they usually meant it as a "teacher without qualification." The schools taught by such teachers were called "popular schools." Anadelia, a literacy teacher of the government-running literacy programme in the community of San Luis, in Segundo Montes, Morazán, told me that she used to be a popular teacher but now she is a "real" teacher. She meant that she did not have a qualification to teach during the war period but now she has one and is therefore no longer a "popular teacher." She was also teaching children at school as well as giving classes to adults in the afternoon when I met her in 2001. This notion of popular education existed among rural communities, whereas Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and teachers who received training in popular education understood it as having the first meaning.

Popular education grew steadily after the outbreak of the civil war in the zones that the FMLN-controlled for those who did not leave the communities, or where public education was completely destroyed or had never been available. At the beginning of the war the FMLN needed to educate its combatants, who consisted of the poor section of Salvadoran society, including many *campesinos*, who are non-literate or barely literate. It recruited Christian activists to take up popular education, which was necessary in order to perform some key military tasks of basic skill such as the use of weapons or sending messages (Hammond 1998). Unlike the government army, which was supported by the US and had

the resources to obtain more sophisticated weapons, the FMLN combatants had to learn how to deal with any available weapons or even how to make simple ones (López Vigil 1989). They also had to learn how to read and write in order to send and receive messages or encode or decode a message through radio communications (Hammond 1998). These activities drove the combatants to learn and the majority of the teachers were combatants themselves, with little education.

In Chalatenango, western El Salvador, the Local Popular Powers (PPLs), one of the major FMLN organisations, developed from the CEBs into *campesino* unions, organising literacy education, which was demanded by the civilian population rather than imposed (Pearce 1986). Here the teachers' union members actively taught both children and adults and then encouraged semi-literate local volunteer teachers to teach. This was because it was believed that the teachers should learn the process of teaching based on Freire's ideas, which was 'to be an important principle established within the struggle itself' (Pearce 1986: 263). In Morazán, north western El Salvador, on the other hand, a small group of people who remained in the communities revived the CEBs after 1985 (Hammond 1998). Many catechists who joined the rebel armies returned to the communities and taught. This community management was formed and duplicated in other communities and acted as governments that responded to immediate community needs such as health care and education (Hammond 1998). The management opened schools which came to be known as popular schools.

In spite of the fact that many teachers in the army front, refugee camps or popular schools knew neither the terminology nor the methodology of popular education, different views of popular education are held by researchers. Hammond (1998) notes that some teachers practised popular education by exploring more empowering ways, whereas Boland (2001) believes that popular education, as a rudimentary programme, did not serve enough to alter formal education; by penetrating deeply, it instead merely acted as emergency treatment in the conflict zones. In my view, however, the popular education that happened during the war should be seen as an important political act that went beyond the basic literacy and traditional education taught in formal public schools, no matter what its scale. Popular education should not be understood only through compensatory schools for children but rather through adult education. Therefore, popular education served the civil war in two ways: it served as direct political propaganda in recruiting soldiers and educating them for the rebel armies, namely the FMLN as well as the prisons, and it also became an alternative to the formal education of the government, where public schools were closed down in areas of conflict, or where formal education was unavailable, as was the case in refugee camps

from the late 1970s. Given the fact that the both meanings are intertwined, the distinction between the two in El Salvador becomes blurred.

Popular education in El Salvador therefore was part of significant social movements during and after the civil war. Popular education was born through CEBs and became a base for the critical minds of the *campesinos*, who now faced another challenge in a country where poverty was still rife, and where many adults still did not know how to read and write. Popular education provides no evidence for the eradication of illiteracy and no statistical data concerning successes, and failures are reported (Hammond 1998). This may be because it is difficult to measure such consequences, but it cannot be denied that its impact was as great as much literature shows (Archer and Costello 1990; Kane 2001). Its aim was not only to provide education but also to bring about equality and empowerment.

The Role of the Church

El Salvador is an intensely religious society and a survey conducted in 1990 states that 72 per cent of allegedly non-religious people pray at least once a day (Aguilar et al. 1993). Christianity was brought by the Spanish mission to Latin America when the Spaniards colonised the region. Pieterse (1990: 139) links the role of the Church with the politico-economic system of Latin America saying that 'semifeudal organizations operating in parts of Latin America, not least among landowning families, are part of this hegemonic culture, which was also sustained by the traditional influence of the Roman Catholic Church.' The Church has by no means been "liberal"; often it has been extremely conservative in league with the ruling economic and political élites controlling people's lives, while the radical faction of Church initiated popular education in El Salvador, defending the voice of voiceless.

The change in the attitudes of the conservative Church in El Salvador was probably first seen during the reign of General Martínez (1931-44). Due to the ruthless and brutal repression represented by the Great Massacre of 1932, the Church started to criticise him and ousted him from his position when he tried to assume power in the following election in 1944 (Riding 1981). Following this incident, however, and until the 1960s the Church supported the *status quo*. In the early 1960s the Church was 'still sharing the fears of communism of the ruling elite' (Riding 1981: 190).

The Vatican took the initiative for the first time to play a role as a catalyst for the profound transformation that led to the 'Catholic Revolution', which emphasised everyone's right to a decent standard of living, education and political participation. In this context, two

encyclicals were issued in 1961 and 1963 by John XXIII, a visionary pope (Riding 1981). The major breakthrough in the revolutionary Catholic movement in Latin America for social justice and the democratisation of religious authority came in the Second Ecumenical Council (Vatican II) from 1962 to 1965 and the Second Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM II) at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. This was when social justice became a central concern for the Catholic Church.

Vatican II talked about commitment to the economic, social and political rights of the residents of this world, acknowledging the harsh reality of life in the Third World and arguing for a 'church of the poor' (CAMINO 1982). The CELAM II was to address Vatican II's concern for human rights and historical transformation, and proposed education for literacy and non-fatalist consciousness as a means to change. The Medellín documents in many parts included the key words of "conscientisation" and "participation" (Chopp 1986). The new pope, Paul VI, addressed not only the spiritual but also the material needs of the underprivileged (CAMINO 1982). Many people, however, opposed this new Catholic stance and there was a strong reactionary movement which developed in the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM III), held at Puebla, Mexico, in 1979 (Chopp 1986). Tension between the Catholic Church and modernisation liberals was ignited and as a result, the Church was divided into two factions.

While most parts of the Church remained conservative, in the post-Medellín era in Latin America new theological and pastoral stances were the duty of the Church to assist the poor (Aguilar et al. 1993). Some started to reject the conventional wisdom of the development establishment, stressing that 'poverty violates one's humanness, therefore one's capacity to relate to God' (Aguilar et al. 1993: 131). That is, being poor is not the will of God. This 'option for the poor' provided the basis for a revolutionary theory of social and political action known as liberation theology (Boland 2001). Accordingly, some, mostly younger, priests in Latin America became progressive, among whom was Catalan-born Jon Sobrino in El Salvador, who advocated liberation theology (Riding 1981).

Lastly, it should be mentioned the role of Protestant churches as another great influence on Salvadoran society. This is because they have had a significant role in the religious lives of people, mostly among the *campesinos* and the urban poor, albeit small compared to the Roman Catholic Church. In El Salvador, Pentecostalism arrived in 1915 (Martin 1990). The Protestant churches⁸ also had a division after the Third Latin American

⁸ Before liberation theology existed, Pentecostal Protestantism provided an "option for the poor" in Latin America (Escobar 1997). There is also a claim that unlike Catholicism, Protestantism attempts to understand modernisation and live in line with it, trying to accommodate and function within the new

Evangelical Conference (CELA) in 1968 and the Latin American Council of Evangelisation in Oaxtapec, Mexico in 1978; one remained conservative, and other became progressive (Chopp 1986). This coincides with the outbreak of the civil war and when the Protestants became more visible. Even if the Catholics still comprised the majority of the population, religious practices among them were declining. By 1996 only 56.7% of the Salvadoran population were Catholics with only 32 % actually practicing, compared with 87% of population being baptised in 1985 (Boland 2001). Many Catholic Salvadorans who converted to Protestantism seem to practise religion more actively than the Catholics, going to church and holding meetings more often. Furthermore, as Aguilar et al. (1993) argues, most of the Protestants in El Salvador were composed of the poorer strata of society.

Liberation Theology

Liberation theology, therefore, was a product of radical change in the Catholic Church and a paradigm shift in theology which addressed a Christian socialist philosophy in the 1960s. It was also allied with the 1960s to 1970s revolutionary movements (Goulet 1974). As Hassett and Lacey (1991: 4) state, the specificity of liberation theology lies in 'its stance, location, and perspective.' They point out six fundamental elements of liberation theology. First, the quest for justice is an integral dimension of Christian faith. Second, although there are genuine possibilities that have not yet been realised in actual society, it is important to seek out 'what is possible in the light of the constraints of the actual' (Hassett and Lacey 1991: 5). This means that understanding the possibilities of the love of God, which seeks 'embodiment of the values of justice, solidarity, cooperation, compassion, humility, truth, and freedom' (Hassett and Lacey 1991: 5), becomes extremely important. Third, it encourages engagement in political action, which would lead to an integral component of faith. Fourth, the current reality in Latin America represents a grave injustice. Fifth, in order to correct this institutionalised and systemic injustice, fundamental structural transformation is necessary. The change must come from people as a principal agent of social change, and it is people who must transform the structural inequality. And last, this action in solidarity serves liberation for people in a real Christian life. Liberation theology makes people essential in this whole action. Chopp (1986: 3) explains the subject change in which:

systems. Moreover, as the Popular Protestant Church penetrated the popular movements and the pastors and leaders were poor compared to the Catholics, they presented an alternative (Escobar 1997). Unfortunately, however, there is no available document specifically on El Salvador.

In liberation theology the bourgeois individual is no longer the primary subject, and authenticity and meaning no longer the central crisis for theology. Now the focus of theology is the nonsubjects of history, those who have been denied any voice or identity in history by their fellow humans.

Liberation theology, therefore, seeks the 'speech and knowledge of God, within the interpretation of those who suffer' (Chopp 1986: 2). Accordingly, favouring liberation over law and order, it pleads for a broad participation of the masses in taking decisions and actions for change as opposed to the élitist or top-down models of planning. Goulet (1974) calls it a theology of development and of liberation. Liberation theologians reject capitalism on the ground that it is radically immoral and structurally incompatible with social justice, and they advocate socialism. Liberation theology developed in a critical dialogue with Marxism, an analysis emphasising class conflict, oppression, and revolutionary ferment (Chopp 1986). Self-determination in terms of political, economic, cultural and psychological goals is seen as an egalitarian pattern of social stratification, including the church itself. Christ, who suffered from oppression by others, was personified as the poor and hungry people because he was killed when he fought for social justice (Hammond 1998). Dependency theory developed in Latin America shares with liberation theology a concern regarding relationships of dependence and domination among nations (Chopp 1986). Autonomy becomes important in opposition to dependence on outside forces. It is said that Central America experienced the effects of liberation theology the most (Hammond 1998).

The CEBs, known as Christian Base communities, were formed and developed in Latin America as grass-roots Christian communities by those who advocated liberation theology. Initially, small study groups were set up by local parishes to discuss social problems and to try to find practical ways of solving them through community action in the 1960s. As Escobar (1997: 95) describes, 'there are small groups of peasants, workers, and neighbours that gather to pray and read the Bible but also to discuss issues related to their daily life, which means that they represent a potential for social activism that could grow in size and impact.' CEBs in Central America became a source of revolution as well as the basis for the cooperation of Catholics (Escobar 1997). The churches located in the base communities were also called the "Popular Church" compared to the Orthodox Church.

In El Salvador, from the early 1960s the Catholic Church, which brought the new church doctrine from abroad, was committed to non-fatalist consciousness, that is, that being poor is not the will of God, education for literacy along the lines espoused by Freire,

and the formation of CEBs in order to condemn the *status quo* (CAMINO 1982). This was one of the two views within the Salvadoran Church. One believed in liberation from below and the political participation of the majority (Hammond 1998). The other was concerned with development or modernisation of the country through economic development, which was an alternative to communism, and this faction created the Christian Democrat Party (PDC) in 1960 (Boland 2001). The pastoral activity of the former faction of the Church increased in the countryside, working in the CEBs. Church workers such as priests, nuns and catechists, who left their élite parishes, organised meetings with *campesinos* to read and discuss liberation theology in the rural areas, poor communities or urban slums. The church workers recruited a few leaders from the communities, who then became lay preachers called the “delegates of the word”. Furthermore, CEBs placed particular emphasis on the need to promote women’s equality, both in terms of the traditional exclusion of women religious workers from certain liturgical responsibilities and in society in general (Thomson 1986). More women than men were active members of the Popular Church.

The tension increased between the oligarchy and the Popular Church, which was involved with the opposition movement. While some Catholic priests became sympathetic to the *campesinos* and advocated liberation theology, the Catholic Church remained conservative. The emergence of these CEBs and the increased concentration of land tenure were not a coincidence in the 1960s. Liberation theology challenged repressive governments through revolutionary movements, ideological militants, and guerrillas in armed struggle in Latin America. Thomson (1986: 47) states, ‘many have been encouraged to join self-help organizations or trade unions through their church and from there have developed wider political commitments.’ Some priests together with the “delegates of the word” initiated action for landless *campesinos*. In Aguilares, El Salvador, there was the first strike in a local sugar mill in the 1970s (Riding 1981). Their solidarity with the poor put priests in danger. Father Rutilio Grande, a priest in Aguilares who campaigned for land reform, was assassinated in 1977, and the *campesinos* working with him were massacred.

At the same time, some Catholics joined the evangelical movement before and during the war because they were afraid of the government, which was against the radical Catholic Church and which killed many priests (Soltero and Saravia 2003). However, in some places, especially in the former conflict zones, the Protestants started to support FMLN because the Protestant community of El Mozote in Morazán was destroyed by the armed forces in 1981. Although there is little literature available on the Protestant’s involvement in El Salvador, CIAZO (the Inter-agency Committee for Literacy in the Eastern Zone), a prominent NGO of popular education, was created by a community development council, some members of a

women's organisation, and the Lutheran Church in the late 1980s proving that the radical part of the Protestant Church⁹ also shared common grounds with the Catholic liberation theology.

Although the Popular Church was the major source of popular education in the 1970s, after the breakout of the war, the church's role in grassroots activities diminished (Hammond 1998). This was mainly due to the assassination of Archbishop Romero in 1980 who was the most outspoken exponent of liberation theology. At his funeral the armed forces murdered some mourners. The supporters chose armed struggle instead of continuing church activities. After the death of Monsignor Romero, Arturo Rivera y Damas was appointed as his successor by the Pope in 1983. He played an important role in negotiating a peace process between the government and the guerrillas. Upon Rivera y Damas' death, Fernández Sáenz Lacalle, who was conservative and had links with a right-wing organisation in Spain, was appointed as archbishop. Although he was dismissive of liberation theology, he subscribed to the options for the poor and actively engaged in debate over social issues (Boland 2001). His deputy, Monsignor Gregorio Rosa Chávez kept the legacy of Monsignor Romero and was outspoken in criticising ARENA (Nationalist Republican Alliance) party's policies¹⁰.

The killing of priests escalated when six Jesuit priests and two women co-workers¹¹ were murdered at the UCA (Central American University "[José Simeón Cañas](#)")¹² by members of an élite US trained battalion of the Salvadoran army in November 1989. These priests were murdered because of 'the role they played as intellectuals, researchers, writers, and teachers in expressing their solidarity with the poor' (Hassett and Lacey 1991: 1). The armed forces continually murdered priests who were outspoken about the prevailing political and economic order. These killings endorse the argument that El Salvador's was one of the

⁹ Indeed, that Protestants have been committed to education and social services in El Salvador (Martin 1990) may also be seen in the fact that various schools were established by Protestants, for instance the Universidad Evangélica de El Salvador (UEES), which was founded in 1981.

¹⁰ ARENA is a right-wing political party that was created in 1981 by Roberto D'Aubuisson who was involved in death squad activities. It has controlled the presidency since 1989.

¹¹ They were Celina Ramos, Elba Julia Ramos, Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., Amando López, S.J., Joaquín López y López, S.J., Ignacio Martín-Baró, S.J, Segundo Montes, S.J., and Juan Ramón Moreno, S.J. Ignacio Ellacuría, Ignacio Martín-Baró and Segundo Montes were among those who were more prominent in terms of their engagement in society through their scholarship and publications.

¹² Jon Sobrino, who was the UCA theologian, was spared his life because he was out of the country at the time this incident happened.

most influential popular churches in Latin America. As a corollary, popular education has radical credentials.

Liberation theology and popular education share a common ground, in which gaining a thorough grasp of reality is essential; both denounce the structures of sin, and emphasise the importance of greater participation by lay people. It was the Church that brought popular education and popular organisations to El Salvador, which eventually led to the war (Hammond 1998). The Medellín document on education, Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano in 1979, demonstrated the influence of Freire (Hammond 1998). At the same time Freire (1992: 48) describes the link between education and Christianity in his book, 'Pedagogy of Hope.' He states that no parents would love their children in a way that would allow for two of their children to suffer so that one could go to school and have a good life. He says if God is the Father, he does not believe in this (Freire 1992). The logic of this example tells us that God is not the cause of the suffering of the poor, in a world in which a few people control most of the resources and the majority have little.

Thus, popular education and liberation theology share Marxist influences. While religion and Marxism cannot be reconciled with each other, liberation theology is a unique usage of Marxism in Latin American religious contexts. Marxism could be seen as a 'resource and conversation partner for liberation theology' (Chopp 1986: 19). The ways in which liberation theology incorporated Marxism were, for example, that a group of 15 and 20 people studied the Bible and examined its relation to their lives. Starting from the Bible the group looked at the national reality of poverty, social structure, then analysed the exploitation from a Marxist point of view. In El Salvador some groups also looked at the national constitution, which stated respect for human rights (Hammond 1998).

Literacy education was sometimes involved in the process. The emphasis on reading the Bible and discussion materials made literacy a requirement for delegates of the word (Hammond 1998). Therefore, popular education is also an instrument of the liberation process; it aims to create, recreate and spread a new knowledge. The new knowledge becomes "popular knowledge" and contributes across the organisation to the transformation of reality. The learning processes of the Bible and literacy, therefore, would provide *campesinos* with education and more confidence in their ability to act, in order to gain political power before fighting (Hammond 1998). Boland states that after the war 'significantly, the church actively encourages self-help and development projects by nongovernmental organisations...' (2001: 67). Popular education teaches how to share and cooperate. The purpose was not merely learning to read a letter, but also to read the world.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that liberation theology created a basis for an “option for the poor” through the CEB movement, offering opportunities to learn not only how to read and write but also how to integrate education into communities whose history of education is inseparable from the history of power in El Salvador. Gaining access to education and literacy was one of the main goals of the armed struggle, as it was always reserved for the privileged. The movement proposed “popular education” as opposed to state-planned education. It was a necessary movement for the popular sector to complement formal education for children, youth and adults in rural areas where the government could not adequately operate the school system, especially during the civil war.

While providing education to all was also an important aspect of popular education, the relevance of the curriculum to people’s lives was one of the main differences from the dominant education provided by the state. Popular education created a learning space in order to provide ‘integral development by cultivating practical skills, intellectual growth, and confidence’ (Hammond 1998: 7). The integration of schools with community life, strongly supported by the radical faction of the Church, was at the centre of these processes. Even though the education system became more democratic and primary education became compulsory after the end of the civil war in 1992, there is still a wide gap in education between urban and rural, the rich and poor, and boys and girls. Christianity and popular education have a long history in El Salvador for the voiceless and is still in the process of evolution.

About the author:

Jasmine Subaşat received her PhD in 2006 from School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London for the subject of Development Studies. She currently works in the same university as a teaching fellow. Her research interests include issues of adult education, theories of power, gender and development, violence against women and corporate social responsibility.

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