

**THE RIGHTS OF THE POOR:
CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND HUMAN RIGHTS PRACTICES
IN LATIN AMERICA'S ANDEAN REGION**

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In seeking reliable ethical bearings in today's world, argues Ian Linden, "we have only the resources of the past and the traditions of our different communities." According to this former director of the Catholic Institute for International Relations in London, there is no viable new formula arising from what he calls "alchemists of the lowest common denominator" such as theologian Hans Kung. Linden recognizes *human rights* language as "the nearest we get to the framework of a shared and popular ethics in a plural world," but argues that it provides a very inadequate and diminished account of ethics. Partial himself to a revived Thomistic approach to Christian ethics focussed on the concept of the common good, the author argues that with the use of human rights language, a narrow and secular view of the world has prevailed among international organizations dealing with the world's poor. He confidently proposes that more is needed and that the Christian tradition in particular still has something important and specific to contribute to "genuine political discourse and dialogue leading to action for justice" (Linden 2003, ix-36).

It is not my intention to take up matters of ethics on a global scale or to debate the merits and demerits of different theoretical and historical approaches to social ethics here. My focus will be limited to Christian, and especially Roman Catholic, approaches to human rights in Latin America in recent years. I agree with Linden that Christianity indeed has something important and specific to contribute to social discourse and dialogue related to action for justice. But I would argue that there are, in fact, multiple

strands of human rights discourse and practice in our world. Latin American Christians have been helping to forge a human rights tradition that is distinct from, and broader than, the prevailing secular and liberal one emphasizing individual claims to rights vis-à-vis the nation state.

Human rights can be defined as claims of moral and/or legal entitlement rooted in peoples' historical experiences of deprivation and injustice, and linked to struggles to overcome such conditions, struggles that can lead to the establishment of new cultural norms and the adoption of specific legal standards. While the Christian approach that has emerged in Latin America does not yet constitute a tradition comparable to the long liberal tradition, this enterprise in social ethics and action provides at the very least an approach to human rights with deep historical and religious roots, and a notable record of achievement. The approach has been marked by “logics” that Richard Falk has termed “naturalist” (certain rights inhering in human nature) and “populist” (people challenging state actors) (Falk 1989, 33-38). It encompasses a full range of claims to justice—civil and political, socioeconomic, and cultural rights. It grounds them in Scripture and Christian social teaching. And it prioritizes the plight and the protagonism of the poor and the marginalized.

In making this affirmation I simultaneously recognize both historical and existing tensions between and among Latin American Christians with regard to human rights, and tragic experiences of ecclesial indifference to suffering, and collusion with repression such as that of the Catholic Church in Argentina under military dictatorship. In making the affirmation, I also recognize that I am in the company of many accomplished

Christian scholars and theologians. While it may be novel to some and less than clear to others, the basic argument is by no means original or unique.

I will begin this paper by providing examples and reviewing major elements of the theological discourse presenting this overall Christian approach to human rights. I will then relate it to the appearance and development of the numerous Christian or church-based human rights organizations that came to the fore in Latin America especially in the 1970s. Finally, I will reflect briefly on the concrete contemporary practices of three prominent but quite different faith-based non-governmental organizations in the central Andes: Peru's Episcopal Social Action Commission (CEAS), Ecuador's Ecumenical Commission for Human Rights (CEDHU), and Colombia's Center for Research and Popular Education (CINEP). I will seek to explain their Christian specificity within what is a largely secular human rights environment, and to highlight the particular contributions they are making to the overall defense and promotion of human rights in those countries.

Theological discourse on human rights in Latin America

One of the earliest scholarly efforts to come to terms with issues of Christianity and human rights in Latin America was an interdisciplinary project launched in 1977 by the Woodstock Theological Center in Washington, D.C. Undertaken "to establish major political and economic factors affecting observance and to help clarify the normative, theological, and philosophical bases of human rights in the Americas" (Crahan 1982, ix), the project resulted in the publication of two important volumes by Georgetown University Press (Hennelly and Langan 1982; Crahan 1982). In the opening essay of the

first volume, Jesuit theologian David Hollenbach reviewed the emergence of human rights as “a central concern for contemporary Roman Catholicism.” He noted the growth of grassroots advocacy by Catholic organizations in Latin America and elsewhere, and the fact that the institutional center of the church, the Holy See, had “adopted the cause of human rights as the prime focus of its ethical teaching and pastoral strategy in the domain of international justice and peace” (1982,9).

In his historical review and commentary, Hollenbach noted that in the 1960s the encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris* of Pope John XXIII and the documents of the Second Vatican Council had included in their statements about human rights “both the civil and political rights generally associated with Western democracies and the social and economic rights emphasized in socialist societies” (1982,12). He argued that the foundation of this *inclusive* “Catholic rights theory” resided in a recognition of *human dignity*, itself rooted in the human person’s transcendence over material things and in the belief that all persons are created in the image of God, redeemed by Jesus Christ and called by God to “a destiny beyond history” (17-18). Hollenbach noted what he saw as a coherent development of this ethical stance in the assertions by the global 1971 Synod of Bishops of peoples’ “right to development” and “right to participation,” calling them “shorthand ways of affirming the interconnected rights of those deprived of development and excluded from economic and political participation” (20). The theologian concluded his essay by recognizing the church’s weaknesses in actually practicing what it was now preaching. In complex and conflicted contexts, he argued, there is a need for choices. But the fundamental ethical choice is not between freedom (civil and political rights) and

bread (social and economic rights), but rather between merely including or clearly favoring the poor and the oppressed.

Defense and support of the full range of rights for every person under current patterns of economic and political conflict, therefore, calls for a choice. This choice is one which will orient policy toward preferential concern for the rights of those who have neither bread nor freedom. It means that the rights of the oppressed, those deprived of both political and economic power, should take priority in policy over privileged forms of influence and wealth (21-22).

A more recent, joint theological effort to treat Christianity and human rights in Latin America took a similar position. *Direitos Humanos, Direitos dos Pobres*, a 1991 volume in the Theology and Liberation series, included contributions by Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff and Argentinian Nobel peace prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel among others. The principal author and editor, Chilean theologian José Aldunate, S.J., wrote in the conclusion that:

What we are affirming is that from our point of view, and for our purposes, human rights are concretely the rights of the poor... This is the perspective of a theology of liberation. It is the perspective of an agenda for action that is not governed by specific ideologies but rather by the evangelical option for the poor and the utopia of a Reign of God that consists of the authentic fraternity of human beings. Within this perspective, human rights are the basic and unsatisfied demands of a people with a destiny, and of every one of the individuals that make up that people. Human rights are above all the rights of the poor (Boff et al 1991, 198; my translation).

Aldunate introduced *Direitos* with two important observations. First, it is not mere values or principles but rather lived experiences that are the point of entry and the point of return for many church people in Latin America:

Anyone who has helplessly witnessed the daily anguish of mothers trying to feed their children, or seen close-up the demoralization of young people without work and a future; anyone who has accompanied family members as they recover loved ones' tortured and destroyed bodies, or shared in the prolonged agony of the fading hope of a family with members who have disappeared, cannot help but approach the issue of human rights from the perspective of the rights of the poor

and oppressed. These are rights that are not mere abstractions but lived realities, and bloody remains that cry out to heaven and to us (Boff et al 1991, 9; my translation).

Second, there is a history that must be recalled, one that predates the Enlightenment and its declarations about the “rights of man.” It is the history of the European encounter with the indigenous peoples of what is now called Latin America. A history marked by brutal forms of oppression, by debates about the questioned humanity and rights of native peoples, and by the valiant witness of a small minority of Christian leaders such as Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas. Aldunate (10-12) cites theologian José Comblin to argue that current human rights issues derive from that five hundred year old experience. “The challenge for the church and for Christianity was raised by these events; we do not speak about human rights because the idea sprung from the mind of some philosophers but because it was inscribed in history by the sacrificial struggle of prophets who knew how to stand up to the spontaneous tendencies of the majority of their contemporaries (Comblin 1978, 211).

Aldunate concluded *Direitos* arguing that a conscientious and authentic Christian commitment to human rights should integrate five elements: (1) a prophetic denunciation of injustice (God hears the cry of the poor, and calls believers to speak and act); (2) an understanding of work for human rights as within the vision of the coming Reign of God; (3) historical and personal discernment under the inspiration of God’s Spirit; (4) a lived solidarity with the oppressed; and (5) practical struggle against the structural injustices (social-economic and legal-political) that derive from sin (Boff et al 1991, 189-196).

Some of Latin America’s best known theologians have contributed a variety of additional approaches and considerations. Leonardo Boff has suggested at least two ways

of legitimately presenting a “biblical-theological perspective on human rights,” one which begins by reflecting in faith on the modern formulations of human rights, and another which begins with Scriptural texts and their historical context and message (Boff et al 1991, 91-107). Gustavo Gutierrez (1983) has highlighted the subjectivity and protagonism of the poor in human history, not merely their victimization. And Jon Sobrino (1988: 103-114) has suggested the presence of a mystical dimension, perceiving the struggle for the rights of the poor as an arena of privileged encounter with the Divine.

The theological discourse on human rights in Latin America over the past few decades has not been homogeneous (see Cleary 1997, 93-95) nor exclusively Roman Catholic of course. Pentecostals, whose numbers grew dramatically for a period of time, have tended to espouse subservience to governmental authorities, and at any rate produced relatively little theology in the process. But historical or ecumenical Protestant thought has converged to a considerable degree with that of these Catholic theologians. The writings of Protestant theologian Jose Miguez Bonino, in particular, resonate deeply with them. Bonino, an Argentinian Methodist who gained considerable status in the World Council of Churches, does not argue theologically on the abstract grounds of salvation and Christology or of creation and natural law, but on similar existential and practical ethical grounds. For him, the “fundamental human right is the right to a life worthy of a human being. The meaning and the content of the churches’ commitment to human rights, even at the more formal legal level, is to be found in the defence of a humane life for the humblest people in society.” Moreover, “God’s universality is expressed in his special concern for the poor, the oppressed, the powerless and the marginalized”(see Tergel 1998, 242-243 and 307).

Institutional Statements and Organizational Ferment

Much of the theological reflection on human rights presented here has been part and parcel of what sociologist Christian Smith has called Latin America's "liberation theology movement." As this well-known (and sometimes much maligned) movement within the church emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, it was itself responding to historical changes and popular mobilization in the continent, and seeking to reposition the church as an institutional advocate of human rights, social justice and grassroots political participation. At least at the level of abstract principles, it has had some success. When the Latin American Bishops' Conference (CELAM) came together in Medellin, Colombia in 1968 the church hierarchy "accepted key aspects of this view" (C. Smith 1991, 234-35). They did so again, though more cautiously, in Puebla, Mexico in 1979.

In the Medellin conference's concluding document on Peace (see CELAM 1968, 41-56), the continent's Roman Catholic bishops stated that Christians could not help but see a situation of injustice that should be called "institutionalized violence," when whole populations live in poverty and a dependence that impedes every possibility of cultural advancement and participation, "violating in this way their fundamental rights" (n. 16). In their pastoral conclusions in the same document, they affirmed the need "to defend according to the Gospel mandate the rights of the poor and the oppressed" (n. 22).

At Puebla, the assembled bishops opposed the doctrine of national security then being promoted by military regimes throughout the continent (n.547-549). They ratified the "clear and prophetic option expressing preference for, and solidarity with, the poor" that they had declared at Medellin (n 1134). And they proclaimed that "enunciating the

basic rights of the human person today and in the future is an indispensable part of the Church's evangelizing mission, and it will ever remain so" (n 1270). The specific groups of rights that were stressed included *individual* rights such as physical integrity and religious liberty (n. 1271), and *social* rights such as education, work, housing, health, social justice, and political participation (n.1272) (see Eagleson and Scharper 1979, 200-201; 264; 280).

Admittedly, these episcopal statements of the late 1960s and 1970s were abstract and frequently ambiguous, and were often reflected in practice only by more progressive pastoral agents or only insofar as they did not seem to put at undue risk the institutional interests of the church. Furthermore, as constitutional democracies replaced dictatorships in many countries since the 1980s, and as liberation theology came under more systematic attack from conservative sectors in the church, official church emphasis on the promotion and defense of human rights has diminished somewhat. Nonetheless, the option for the poor and the defense of human rights have been incorporated into the official social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church globally and in Latin America. At the most recent meeting of CELAM, in the Dominican Republic in 1992, the bishops again stated in their "Message to the Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean" that "human rights are violated not only by terrorism, repression, and murder, but also by the existence of conditions of extreme poverty and unjust economic structures that give rise to vast inequalities... Violence against the rights of children, women, and the poorest groups in society (e.g., small farmers, indigenous people, and African Americans) are worthy of special condemnation." (n. 167). The prelates likewise declared from Santo Domingo the need to "Promote human rights more effectively and courageously on the

basis of the gospel and the Church's social teaching, through word, action, and collaboration, by becoming committed to the defense of individual and social rights of the human being, of peoples, of cultures, and of the marginal sectors, as well as those who are vulnerable or imprisoned." (n. 168) (Hennelly 1993, 118-119).

Protestant voices have by no means been silent in Latin America when it comes to speaking about human rights and the poor, and their hands by no means idle when it has come to demonstrating Christian commitment. On the thirtieth anniversary of the Pinochet coup in Chile, the final document of an ecumenical assembly convened by the World Council of Churches and the Foundation for Social Assistance of the Christian Churches (FASIC) expressed the shared conviction that "dignity and life can be wounded not only by the violation of civil and political rights, but also by the denial of economic, social, and cultural rights." The participants proclaimed faith in "a God who opts for the poor and for men and women who are excluded," and they pledged "to continue to respond to the call made by the critical reality of our region in the arena of dignity and human rights" (Consejo Mundial de Iglesias and FASIC 2003, translation mine).

Human Rights Organizations

Numerous church organizations with a practical focus on the defense and promotion of human rights came to the fore in South America especially in the 1970s. They were known above all for their valiant opposition to the repression and abuses of military dictatorships. This organizational ferment came in the wake of a series of right-wing military coups that began in Brazil in 1964 and that included Bolivia in 1971, Chile in 1973, Peru in 1975 and Argentina in 1976.

In this context, the emphasis of these South American church organizations was squarely on civil and political rights. They were dealing with atrocities that included widespread torture and the “disappearance” of supposed subversives, as well as a general suspension of democratic rights and the dissemination of an ideology of national security that sought to justify their brutal practices (see Cleary 1997). Perhaps the best known of the organizations was the *Vicaría de la Solidaridad* in Chile.

As Brian Smith (1979) has indicated, while the work of these church organizations emerged in reaction to new and extreme conditions in the continent, and did not in itself result in bringing about fundamental social change, the organizations did meet with some success. In addition to supporting victims of repression and their family members, they created greater public awareness of the abuses that were being committed, helped to de-legitimize the dictatorial regimes and undermine their ideological foundations, questioned the underlying socio-economic structures the regimes were defending, and contributed to the development of critical social consciousness and participation of grassroots actors in and beyond the churches.

Where in this significant effort of the 1970s, one might ask however, were the social and economic rights of which the theologians and bishops were speaking? Where was the defense of the poorest (as opposed, for example, to those of student or political activists)? Was this human rights effort in Latin America not, in fact, marked by the kind of “liberal” focus on civil and political rights (and concomitant lack of attention to social and economic rights) that Livezey (1989) found in his 1980s survey of U.S. religious organizations working for human rights? Was there truly a preferential option for the poor and their rights, or were the churches defending in words the poor and the

oppressed, but defending in practice mostly the civil and political rights of persecuted labor leaders, students and professionals who were considerably better off?

In the first place, it is important to recall that military repression in Latin America was not unconnected to social and political movements there that challenged traditional patterns of domination, poverty and inequality. To the contrary. Latin America's military regimes of the 60s and 70s were imposed in response to movements aimed at changing the status quo, and favoring the rural and urban populations that had been relegated historically to exploitation and oppression. The 1964 coup in Brazil was a reaction to growing social movements and policies of the Goulart government perceived as threats to the interests of the dominant classes. The right-wing coups in both Bolivia and Peru came against military governments that had been committed to significant social reforms (those of J.J. Torres and Juan Velasco Alvarado respectively), and the 1973 coup in Chile against a leftist government that had been elected with the aim of opening a "democratic road to socialism." To oppose these military dictatorships was, even if indirectly, to challenge the ruling elites that those regimes were defending, and the social structures that had historically kept the poor down.

In the second place, the majority of the people who were directly assisted by these human rights organizations, or who stood to benefit socially from their actions, were arguably poor to at least some degree. Poverty was and is prevalent in Latin America. Clearly there were labor and peasant leaders, and student and other political activists, who could be described as middle or in some cases even upper class. Many others were of very limited means. There seems, however, to be an absence of data that would allow

for a reliable analysis of the class status of those who benefited from the work of these human rights organizations in the years following the right-wing military coups.

Next, one should note a certain evolution in the work of the numerous human rights organizations that had initially given almost all their attention to civil and political rights. As Tergel notes, Chile's *Vicaría de la Solidaridad* first worked intently on documenting and protesting torture, disappearances, and arbitrary imprisonment, but later turned to economic issues as well. It provided food for the hungry and workshops to teach skills to the unemployed (1998, 115). In Brazil, as it became clearer to most that the deeper causes of violations of civil and political rights resided in socio-economic realities, there was an apparent "shift in the axis of the commitment to human rights" (Boff et al 1991, 81). The new perspective was perceptible in justice and peace organizations, Christian base communities, pastoral ministry offices, church-related research and documentation centers, and the Catholic bishops' annual Lenten campaigns (Boff et al 1991, 81-82).

Finally, it should be remembered that the rights of the poor were and have been defended and promoted by many church or faith-based organizations that have focused on justice but not specialized in human rights *per se*, nor used the term prominently.

Brazil's Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) and its Children's Pastoral Office (*Pastoral do Menor*) are good examples. As Daniel Levine (1992, 5) has noted:

The church as *voice of the voiceless* has become a familiar metaphor in contemporary Latin America. The phrase carries with it images of fearless advocacy for the marginal and for those without power or position. Across the region, church leaders and activists have taken up the cause of human rights, promoted and empowered grass-roots groups, and helped stake out legitimate new fields for religiously inspired criticism and collective action: housing, land, jobs, unions, to name only a few.

As the period of military dictatorships ceded in the past two decades to one of limited democratic rule, the promotion of social and economic— and cultural— rights has come to the fore more visibly. The rights of blacks and of indigenous peoples have become more prominent, as have those of children and of women. Some major human rights organizations like the *Vicaría* have ceased to exist. Others are simply not the center of attention that they once were, as a simple review of the books published or the journalistic reports filed on Latin America in the past decade make clear. Nonetheless, the number of human rights organizations, large and small, has actually mushroomed in Latin America; Cleary (1997,62) estimated that there were at least 3,000 in existence in the mid to late 1990s. Faith based human rights organizations continue to carry out an important and painstaking labor throughout Latin America, giving attention to the full range of human rights and defending the poor. In the final section of this paper, I will turn my attention to three such organizations that have gained a degree of prominence in the Andean region, one in Peru, one in Ecuador, and one in Colombia.

Three Contemporary Faith-based Rights Organizations: CEAS, CEDHU, CINEP

A brief examination of Peru's Episcopal Social Action Committee (CEAS), Ecuador's Ecumenical Commission for Human Rights (CEDHU) and Colombia's Center for Research and Popular Education (CINEP) will help to illustrate the currency of the Latin American approach to human rights I have been describing. Their work encompasses a full range of claims to justice—civil and political, social, economic and cultural rights. It is grounded in Christian faith. And it is concerned in a special way with both the plight and the protagonism of the poor and the marginalized.

CEAS, CEDHU and CINEP are not necessarily representative of Christian human rights organizations in the continent. Throughout Latin America each country and every organization has its own specificity. But as prominent and highly respected non-governmental institutions in the Andean region (generally less studied in this regard than the Southern Cone or Central America) they provide excellent, concrete examples of the contributions currently being made to the overall defense and promotion of human rights.

Peru, Ecuador and Colombia are marked by numerous similarities as well as stark differences in their history, demography, economy, politics, and cultural and religious life. Suffice it to say for purposes of this paper that all three have been plagued by widespread and even growing poverty in recent years, especially in rural areas. Ethnic and racial dynamics quite literally color their poverty and social inequality; Peru and Ecuador have very large indigenous populations, while Colombia has a sizeable population of African descent. All three countries fall into the medium range of “human development” elaborated by the United Nation’s Development Programme, though Colombia has the relatively highest country ranking of the three (#73), and Ecuador (#100) the lowest (see UNDP 2004). Out migration has increased dramatically in recent years, including to the United States and Europe. According to the U.N.’s High Commission for Refugees, Colombia is facing one of the most severe humanitarian crises in the entire world. War has induced two million Colombians to flee their homes in the past two decades (see Secretariado Nacional de Pastoral Social 2004,13 and Livingstone 2004, 29).

CEAS, CEDHU and CINEP emerged at different times and in different circumstances, but in all three cases their human rights work *as such* was initiated in the

period between 1977 and 1980. While not at all unrelated to the social and economic struggles of the poor, the work was undertaken in direct response to repression. CEAS had been founded in 1965 as an official arm of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Peru, to animate and coordinate the social outreach of the church on a national level. From the beginning it was concerned specifically with the poor and their needs, but it was under the right-wing military regime of Francisco Morales Bermúdez in 1977 that CEAS felt compelled to open an office for human rights. A nationwide strike had been called in July of that year to protest badly deteriorating living standards and government repression. The reaction of the military was harsh. There were more than a dozen deaths, massive detentions, and dismissals of thousands of workers who had been absent from their place of employment on the day of the strike. CEAS provided material and legal assistance to detained workers and their families, promoted the creation of local, church-related human rights organizations, documented the abuses, and informed and educated people about their human rights (Youngers and Peacock 2002, 2-3).

CEDHU was formed in Ecuador two years later, in 1978. The country was then emerging from a decade of military rule, but a strike by sugar workers resulted in a violent police and military assault on the workplace. Striking laborers and family members who had joined them there were massacred. Through the leadership of Lutheran pastor Washington Padilla and Catholic auxiliary bishop Alberto Luna Tobar in Quito, CEDHU was born as an ecumenical human rights organization.

CINEP, like CEAS, was initially founded to concentrate on poverty and "integral human development." It aimed to transform Colombian society in the direction of greater social justice through research, education, and action inspired by a Christian vision of

humanity (González 1998, 26). A human rights office by that name was not established until 1980. This occurred when the government of Julio César Turbay Ayala imposed a repressive Security Statute and began justifying its actions with the widely disseminated doctrine of national security. CINEP helped organize Colombia's Association of Family Members of the Disappeared. Then, from the mid 1980s onward it focussed on the development of a systematic database of human rights violations; and on grassroots education around human rights, evolving toward the inclusion of international humanitarian law, and people's social and economic rights (see Pérez 1998, 211-231).

In the decades since the founding of these three human rights organizations, much has occurred of course. The numbers of the poor have increased. The external debts of the countries have grown, with interest payments consuming sizeable portions of government resources. A popular and indigenous uprising in Ecuador forced out a corrupt civilian government, while the "dollarization" of the economy has fueled impoverishment among those in the lower income strata. Two decades of armed insurgency and rights violations in Peru have resulted in the deaths of nearly 70,000 people according to the 2003 report of that country's Commission of Truth and Reconciliation (see Klaiber 2004, 178). The complex, many-layered conflict in Colombia, fed in part by U.S. military aid and the appetite for illegal drugs, has led to an estimated 60,000 deaths, millions of displaced people, and unspeakable acts of brutality (see Amnesty International 2002; González 2004; Kirk 2004; Livingstone 2004). The violence in Colombia shows no sign of abating, despite a plethora of peace initiatives at both the grassroots and more formal institutional levels (see García-Durán 2004).

What are CEAS, CEDHU and CINEP doing today in the field of human rights? What are their priorities? What makes them distinct as Christian human rights organizations? What concrete contributions are they making? In an effort to help determine this, I interviewed their respective directors in October and early November of this year. Telephone contact was established with all three, and a common set of questions then directed to each. Two rounds of detailed written responses were received from Laura Vargas of CEAS, and Elsie Monge of CEDHU. I was able to interview Alejandro Angulo of CINEP personally in Bogota.

The Current Priorities

When asked first of all to indicate their organizations' current priorities, each of the directors tellingly named areas of action that included *both* social and economic rights, and civil and political ones. Vargas pointed to the need to disseminate the recent findings of Peru's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to work with victims of the country's political violence in the pursuit of appropriate sanctions and reparations, and to strive for national reconciliation. The latter has an important social component because for CEAS, reconciliation is "understood as the necessary establishment of more equitable relations among all Peruvians, seeking to reduce the profound gaps that currently exist." CEAS is also working for reforms in the nation's penal and prison systems, for a system of justice that "would protect the rights and the dignity of the human person." According to Vargas, most of the incarcerated are in that situation "for economic reasons" (Vargas interview, translations mine here and hereafter).

Elsie Monge stated that CEDHU has consistently sought to “unmask the State’s repressive system and to promote social justice.” Currently, she noted, the organization is dealing with the negative impact of government policies like the “dollarization” of the economy and the country’s large foreign debt, as well as the impact of regional plans such as Plan Colombia and a proposed free trade agreement (TLC). A campaign is being prepared about the potential effects of the TLC on health care, especially the price of medicines. This year CEDHU has helped create a Human Rights Observatory, a creative initiative aimed at getting civil society more involved in vigilance, analysis and communication about the human rights situation in the country (Monge interview, translations mine here and hereafter).

For CINEP, the current priorities are strengthening grassroots organizations through education on economic and social rights (seen as a means of working toward what Alejandro Angulo calls an “alternative social pact” in the country); and the continued maintenance of a reliable database (Banco de Datos de Derechos Humanos y Violencia Política en Colombia) on human rights violations. The latter effort is carried out in conjunction with the church organization Justice and Peace. The former is carried out through educational workshops aimed at local parish, peasant, labor, and civic organizations in five regions of Colombia, including Magdalena Medio where the work has been going on for over twenty years (Angulo interview, translations mine here and hereafter).

Opting for the Poor

Educational activity is important for all three of these human rights organizations, according to their directors. Frequently it is aimed at fostering the capacities and the

agency of the poor. CEAS seeks to elaborate its educational materials so that they are understandable to all. CEDHU functions with “the conviction that the people need to know their rights in order to defend them, as well as to respect those of others.” The organization “carries out formation programs in human rights with secondary school students, leaders of grassroots organizations, and members of rural communities in the central highlands.” CINEP provides workshops that analyze the country’s social reality, seek to enhance personal and collective awareness and responsibility, and promote people’s capacity to demand their rights from the State. CINEP prefers to work with “the dispossessed and the marginalized” as Fr. Angulo puts it, rather than with students in middle-class and upper-class Catholic schools.

An option for the poor is at the heart of all three of these organizations for human rights. Vargas stated that “CEAS can only be understood from the option for the poor.” CEAS works with “peasants, miners, workers who have been fired or are involved in labor disputes, victims of violence and their families, those imprisoned for economic reasons...innocent prisoners who have been accused of terrorism, cases of extreme need, support for popular organizations...” Monge, for her part, had this to say about CEDHU:

The influence of the Commission is based on qualities that are identified with Christian principles: solidarity, courage, respect for the dignity of all, truth. Another characteristic demonstrated in its work is its dedication to the impoverished and the excluded of society. This presupposes a communion of ideals, vocation, and commitment (translation mine).

Christian identities

In a human rights environment that is largely secular and sometimes very partisan in nature, CEAS, CEDHU and CINEP are organizations with Christian roots and identity. Their values and the motivations of their leadership tend to set them somewhat apart.

CEAS is organically connected to the Catholic Bishops Conference in Peru and confessional in character. CEDHU is broadly ecumenical in orientation and CINEP is a Jesuit institution, though not a confessional one. Each of the three works through the local structures of the churches, especially the dioceses and the parishes, the schools, and religious communities. And they benefit from the backing and financial support of international Christian organizations and foundations, particularly in Europe.

These three Andean organizations draw on the religious resources of their heritage, including ritual and sacrament. CEAS, according to Vargas, seeks to “maintain a common spirit in the institution that reflects a practice which is understood to be ecclesial, and focused on promoting the dignity of the human person.” In the years of the worst violence it regularly organized National Days of Prayer and Fasting for Peace. Its leadership affirms that the Gospel is the deep root of human rights. CEDHU works with a variety of faith communities to organize an annual Cry of the Excluded each October 12th. It helps to organize eucharistic celebrations on the anniversaries of the deaths of bishops Leonidas Proaño and Oscar Romero, as well as a public “Way of the Cross” during Holy Week, and it joins with the local Lutheran church in holding an annual ecumenical service for International Human Rights Day. Faith, said Monge, is the Christian’s motivation for promoting respect for human rights; it’s a matter of “putting into practice the liberating message of Christ.” CINEP’s director indicated that the social teaching of the church is an important internal point of reference, but since CINEP works with people of diverse political and religious tendencies it chooses not to disseminate official church teaching. It sponsors a yearly ecumenical liturgy in commemoration of its martyred staff members, Mario Calderón and Elsa Alvarado, killed in 1997. CINEP, in

the words of Angulo, “translates the Gospel into work for social justice;” Christianity and human rights are connected above all through the Incarnation and Jesus’ command that we “love one another.”

Credibility and challenges

As organizations with religious identities, do CEAS, CEDHU, and/or CINEP have greater credibility than other human rights organizations? A greater ability to call diverse individuals and organizations together? Greater difficulties or challenges than others? Vargas’ response was that credibility is really not theirs to judge. As for calling others together (*poder de convocatoria*), CEAS had been most effective around economic and social rights, in national initiatives on the foreign debt and fair trade. Like CEDHU and CINEP, CEAS works in broad coalitions on most issues. A difficulty resides in occasional limits placed on their action by the church institution and its hierarchy. An example was a recent campaign against the death penalty. While all of the bishops had supported the “Life before Debt” campaign in their jurisdictions, said Vargas, not all had opened their doors to a campaign against capital punishment.

CEDHU, according to Monge, has gained credibility from its long and serious commitment in defending human rights, its identification with Christian principles, its ecumenism and its pluralism. The fact that two religious women have helped direct it has helped with credibility, together with a commitment that transcends particular or institutional interests. Its attempt to provide “a space of confluence for social organizations” and to “act transparently, without hidden cards,” she believes, has given the organization a greater *poder de convocatoria* than others. Several bishops actively

support the provincial commissions of human rights. CEDHU, meanwhile, “has occupied a space on the national scene and the Catholic hierarchy accepts it, even when some of them may not agree at times with our positions.”

CINEP, Angulo declared, has tremendous credibility in Colombia. One reason is the quality of its applied research (it won two national social science awards in 2004). Another is its excellent database. And its local staff members inspire a high degree of confidence among people because of their “honesty, lack of opportunism, and closeness to the community.” Angulo also believes that the organization has a greater ability than others to call people together on many issues. CINEP’s approach is seen as different, non-political in the narrow sense. It takes the “communist edge” off discussions about and work for human rights. While it is religious, it is welcoming to all and non-sectarian in character. Finally, it shares in the prestige of the Catholic church as a good mediator within the Colombian conflict.

In the past, said its director, there were some tensions between CINEP and “holy mother church,” but the organization enjoys good relations with the Jesuit community and the Catholic hierarchy today. Diocesan justice and peace commissions ask CINEP for advice, or offer a place on their boards of directors. Relations with the archbishop of Bogota are good, and last year CINEP was invited by the national conference of bishops to organize its annual assembly, centered on the country’s problematic rural and agrarian reality. There also used to be hostility toward CINEP from the Communist Party and leaders of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerilla movement. Today, said Angulo, there are occasional dialogues. FARC perceives CINEP as serious,

and opposed not to its principles but its methods for achieving social change and social justice.

Human rights organizations like CEAS, CEDHU and CINEP face daunting challenges, but they are making a distinctive and important mark in Latin America's social and political development. So have organizations like the *Vicaría de la Solidaridad* before them. While socially committed Christians are not the only ones to seek justice for the poor and the oppressed, or recognition and respect for a full range of human rights, specifically Christian thought and actions have contributed much to the region's overall movement for human rights in recent decades. For a committed sector of Latin American Christians, as Cleary (1997, 64) put it, "human rights activity is an expression of their faith, as surely as Mother Teresa expresses her belief through caring for the sick." Despite dangers and difficulties, and with less visibility than in the past, such a witness for justice seems destined to endure.

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