

## Article

# Living Theology in a Pluralistic Latin America: An Exploration of Ecclesial Base Communities through the Lens of Social Imaginaries

Héctor A. Acero Ferrer

Institute for Christian Studies, 59 St. George Street, Toronto, ON M5S 2E6, Canada; hacerofer@icscanada.edu

**Abstract:** The geography, histories, and ethnic composition of the Latin American continent pose a great challenge when attempting to identify and describe the region's constitutive religious traditions and experiences. This task is further complexified by the hybridity, fluidity, and porosity of the region's cultural groups. However, there is an aspect of Latin American religiosity that shares a significant family resemblance across the continent: the small community settings in which religiosity often emerges and consolidates as a worldview, commonly known as Ecclesial base communities. Informed by liberation theology, these communities are a uniquely generative experiment in social, political, and religious life. Scholarly accounts of liberation theology fail to identify key aspects of how Ecclesial base communities generate ways of being, knowing, and making meaning. While many of these accounts depict liberation theology as a socio-political discourse of theological origin, they do not unearth the multidirectional interaction between political practice and theological thought at the heart of these communities. In this paper, I aimed to fill this gap in the literature by reframing liberation theology as a set of social imaginaries, making use of Paul Ricoeur's theories of memory and cultural imagination to provide the philosophical ground to understand the lived theology of Ecclesial base communities. In doing so, I maintain that liberation theology is not only a theoretical discourse that emerges from these communities, but also the inarticulate background of their ways of thinking, communicating, and living, one that provides an existential orientation through which Latin Americans can provide coherence to their collective action and recognize their own capacity to change their reality of oppression.



**Citation:** Acero Ferrer, Héctor A. 2023. Living Theology in a Pluralistic Latin America: An Exploration of Ecclesial Base Communities through the Lens of Social Imaginaries. *Religions* 14: 259. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020259>

Academic Editors: Laurens ten Kate and Bram van Bortel

Received: 12 December 2022

Revised: 6 February 2023

Accepted: 13 February 2023

Published: 15 February 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Keywords:** liberation theology; lived theology; social imaginaries; Paul Ricoeur; Latin America; Ecclesial base communities

## 1. Introduction

Rejected by humanity and seeing themselves without shelter, Mary and Joseph left the inhospitable town and took refuge in a grotto by the hillside . . . . The Divine Child, unknown yet by His human creatures, had to turn to the aid of irrational beasts so that they could heat with their warm breath the icy air of that winter night, and they, in turn, showed Him with this humble act the respect and adoration that Bethlehem had denied Him . . . . The multitude of angels, who descended from heaven to contemplate that unparalleled wonder, broke out in joy, and made the air vibrate in the harmonies of the 'Gloria in Excelsis,' the same echo of adoration that takes place around the throne of the Almighty, made audible for an instant to the ears of the poor on earth.

—Traditional Colombian, *Novena de Aguinaldos*, circa 1725<sup>1</sup>

The elaborate narrative of the nativity of Jesus to which this fragment belongs has accompanied a popular form of Colombian devotionals, commonly known as *Novenas de Aguinaldos*, for more than two centuries. The *Novenas* constitute a form of Advent devotional life that has transcended the boundaries of sacred spaces and institutional

liturgical practices in Colombia, becoming a cultural practice found in wider community celebrations, secular spaces, and diverse public settings in the country. The ubiquitous nature of these prayers—as well as their historical development, which is parallel to that of Colombia’s own development as a nation<sup>2</sup>—makes them an ideal ground upon which to explore the religious worldview and ethos that inform Colombian religiosities and theologies. Popular Latin American devotional practices, such as the *Novenas*, provide important insights into the origins of liberation theology, one of the most significant theological expressions in the region. The emphasis on the marginalization of the Divine Child and Holy Family and the central role of the dispossessed in the retelling of the scriptural narratives—as seen in the passage quoted above—are only two of the themes that would eventually be codified in the “preferential option for the poor,” one of liberation theology’s foundational principles.

The connection between early devotional life and the academic theologies that would eventually become dominant in Latin America illustrates how liberation theology emerged on the fertile ground provided by multiple existing religious practices and spiritualities and, one could argue, by existing ‘lived theologies.’ What is, then, the fertile ground in question? What are the common understandings that inspired the liturgical practices that served as liberation theology’s seedbed, such as the *Novenas*?

My aim in this paper is to explore how such fertile ground relates to Latin Americans’ diverse ways of being, knowing, and making meaning in “hours of darkness.”<sup>3</sup> In particular, I would like to examine how the pluralistic context of Latin America found expression in liberatory discourses that emerged out of varied local communities in what would eventually be historically indexed as liberation theology. To accomplish this goal, I will use the notion of social imaginaries as articulated by the Simagine Consortium and Paul Ricoeur’s theory of cultural imagination—in particular, his work on productive and creative imagination—to argue that the academic discourse that is often titled ‘liberation theology’ is simply an expression of social imaginaries endemic to Latin America. I will use the academic articulation of liberation theology that followed the 1968 gathering of the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) in response to the Second Vatican Council—in particular the work of Leonardo Boff—as a place from which to observe the richer social imaginaries that I argue lie beneath the surface. My working hypothesis is that such academic expression relies on the kinds of relationships facilitated by Ecclesial base communities, the knowledges they produce, and their political action. In this way, as the name for a set of social imaginaries, I will conclude that liberation theology is not solely a theoretical product of the interaction of European theologies with Latin American religious expressions, but more centrally a latent ‘lived theology’ of these communities at the time of the Roman Catholic renewal ushered in by the Second Vatican Council.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Liberation Theology: Utopia or Ideology?

In his 1990 review “Considering Liberation theology as Utopia,” political scientist Daniel H. Levine outlines a very insightful compilation of stipulations for the study of liberation theology. In his attempt to respond to the question, “[i]s Latin American liberation theology utopian, and if so, so what?”<sup>5</sup> Levine encounters a changing and multifaceted object of study, one that scholars often misread as a monolithic movement. Even for someone like Levine, who was more interested in the political potential than in the inner theological dialogue of liberation theology, it is evident that what at first glance appears to be a fairly homogeneous body of theological texts with political overtones is in fact a very fluid, diverse, and multilayered tradition. Levine argues that liberation theology cannot be understood in terms of intellectual history alone because of its deep involvement in politics and its commitment to the promotion of social action groups—both of which possess a complex relationship with Marxism as a theoretical construct and a human praxis.<sup>6</sup>

But why start this philosophical inquiry into liberation theology with a detour into political science? This detour is necessary precisely because this external perspective provides a key insight into the way liberation theology informs the relationship between

ways of being religious and expressions of communal being in the Latin American context. Levine's approach is indicative of a scholarly trend that understands liberation theology as both a political movement and a theoretical corpus, a fluid and complex expression of utopian political thought, formulated in religious language, that orients and motivates action.<sup>7</sup> According to this line of thought, what is unique to Latin American liberation theology is the way in which it makes community organization primary to the visualization and realization of another order of existence.<sup>8</sup>

This focus on liberation theology's utopian-communitarian character only tells part of the story, as its theoretical and organizational expressions on their own fail to provide a full picture of what liberation theology actually means for Latin Americans. A brief overview of the documents that scholars such as Levine consider foundational to liberation theology reveals that there is, in the communities visioning such political transformation, a clear intent to resource their forward-looking movements and initiatives with a careful exploration of the past—both the material past of the communities undergoing transformation and the past traditions they inherit and carry forward.<sup>9</sup> Ricoeur's understanding of the distinction between ideology and utopia—and of the dialectical exchange of these forces in shaping productive imagination at a social level—will be the theoretical bedrock for the analysis of this past–future dynamic in liberation theology.<sup>10</sup>

In their retrieval of key images and narratives from their traditional texts, the communities in question gain a coherent grasp of their current reality, identify an orientation for their liberatory practice, and eventually mobilize their members to action. While political science provides a better conceptualization of the outward-working, utopian side of this process, the fields of theology and religious studies provide a far better understanding of its inward-looking, ideologically rooted side. Here, I am aided by Ricoeur's notion of ideology, taken as "the process of symbolization constitutive of action as such."<sup>11</sup> While the ideological function can lead to self-legitimation and distortion, at its most basic level, ideology provides coherence to action through patterns such as the ones seen in liberation theology. Thinkers who consider themselves embedded in this theological practice spend much of their scholarly energy in the service of articulating how their way of doing theology remains a faithful interpretation of the Christian tradition, one that, from within the bounds of the generative Christian message, actively responds to the reality of oppression most Latin Americans experience.<sup>12</sup> What is key to this ideological work is the attempt to place liberation theology within the larger history of Christianity and, in some cases, within the boundaries of specific Christian denominations and concrete local church communities.<sup>13</sup> For thinkers such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, and Juan Luis Segundo, liberation theology—including its utopian impulses—is the result of an interpretation of a salvific message ultimately traceable to the Christian scriptures, a message whose consequences unfold in history and whose fruition requires the active participation of all Christians.<sup>14</sup> In doing so, these theologians emphasize the foundational role of the pre-existent Christian tradition in the development of liberation theology's utopian vision that has been so clearly identified by political scientists such as Levine.

For more than half a century, processes of social transformation in Latin America have been outwardly influenced—among other factors—by a way of conceiving community that emerges from the principles identified by theologians such as Gutierrez, Boff, and Segundo.<sup>15</sup> These thinkers, along with others adjacent to them, have had a significant impact on recent socio-political transformations in this region. Their intellectual influence on the religious and community leaders who chart, promote, and usher community transformation in Latin America is concrete evidence of such impacts.<sup>16</sup> However, the fluidity and porosity of liberation theology calls for a more complex understanding of its relationship with socio-political engagement and public discourse. A simple unidirectional account of the impact of liberation theology on Latin American politics fails to account for the way in which theologically grounded reflection on social realities and emergent forms of community organization mutually influence each other. It is this intricate relation

between shared reflection and collective transformative action—its origin, development, and fruits—that is at the centre of my analysis.

To provide the conditions of possibility for this analysis, I argue that the articulate, explicit scholarly reflection that is usually identified as liberation theology—and exemplified by the writings of such figures as Gutierrez, Boff, and Segundo—is merely the theoretical expression of a ‘lived theology’ that cannot be reduced to an academic enterprise. For the sake of this argument, I understand ‘lived theology’ as a spiritually informed praxis that receives its impetus and orientation from the background that gives things and events the meaning that they come to have for concrete human communities. Taken as “a process more than an academic discipline,” a lived theology is “the enactment of that, which is most significant to us at any given moment and [is] lived out in our everyday existence, rather than the systematization of creedal propositions of any given faith tradition.”<sup>17</sup> This definition, by Todd DuBose, highlights two aspects of the notion of lived theology that will be at the core of my analysis: its process of enactment of the principles associated to a faith tradition and its inscription within a historical moment.

Therefore, I will hereby use the term “liberation theology” to denote the Latin American *lived theology* to which I previously alluded. In doing so, I intend to preserve the nuances of the reflection–practice dialectic integral to liberation theology, particularly as I intend to make salient the lived theology of individuals and communities considered oppressed<sup>18</sup>—a lived theology which I claim is liberatory in nature. An exclusive focus on liberation theology as an academic discourse runs the risk of losing sight of the more praxiological elements of liberation theology as a lived theology, a unique kind of wisdom that emerges from the spiritually informed praxes of the oppressed. Understanding liberation theology as a lived theology will thus preserve the singularity of the voices of the oppressed, voices that might otherwise become inaudible to any analysis.

Consequently, I will hereby refer to the theoretical body commonly identified with liberation theology as the academic expression of a pre-existent lived theology. However, I will often resort to texts from within this academic practice as ways to access the common inarticulate understandings to which I refer here. While I recognize that this conceptual approach challenges common understandings of liberation theology and blurs the boundaries between the academic exercise of theology and lived spiritual practices, I see it as truer to the spirit of liberation theology, in which theory is grounded in praxis through the communal reflection on scripture and tradition. Consequently, I am not only interested in exploring how liberation theology generates a set of understandings and principles for public dialogue, political action, and academic reflection, but also in tracing how these understandings and principles enrich the reflection and dialogue of concrete local contexts. In doing so, I will show how liberation theology is integral to the common, yet latent, understandings of what it means to be human for many communities in Latin America, namely, this region’s social imaginaries.

### 3. From Ideology and Utopia to Social Imagination

In order to assemble these exploratory lines into a single analysis, I appeal to Ricoeur’s theory of cultural imagination, whereby he creates a “single conceptual framework” for the interrelated phenomena of ideology and utopia in order to “better grasp ... their complementarity in a system of social action.”<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur’s nuanced conceptualization of these phenomena and their relation to one another provides a helpful tool to understand the dialectic at play within liberation theology, conceived as a lived theology. Furthermore, this theory of cultural imagination allows me to explore the bi-directional exchange between liberation theology—under my suggested understanding—and the ways in which it has been expressed in academic discourse. In his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, Ricoeur further develops this theory as a philosophical system that accounts for the emergence of collective thought (and action) through the dialectical interplay described above.<sup>20</sup> As the dynamic exchange between the two forces that govern collective understanding, Ricoeur argues that the *healthy expression* of the dialectic between ideology and utopia creates space for

productive imagination, supporting a form of cultural imagination that is able to bring coherence and renewal to collective life.<sup>21</sup>

Ricoeur's exploration of cultural imagination through his analysis of ideology and utopia provides the main philosophical framework for my exploration into liberation theology *qua* lived theology. Ricoeur's work has a twofold function, serving as a lens with which to examine liberation theology's ideology–utopia dialectic (as outlined above), as well as providing an approach to analyze how Latin Americans (at least those operating within the liberation theology tradition) hold a world in common through shared images and a shared practice. Within this framework, Ricoeur's illuminating articulation of the role of memory and narrative in the development of a capable self,<sup>22</sup> including his deep awareness of the mobilizing potential of biblical narrative,<sup>23</sup> can also become resources to explore liberation theology's rootedness in scriptural and traditional textual sources, including the way they are memorialized and emplotted, and the role these sources play in outlining of future vistas, as it will be illustrated in the last section of this paper.

Together with the framework provided by Ricoeur's theory of cultural imagination, Simagine Consortium's notion of social imaginaries plays a decisive role in achieving a more fulsome understanding of liberation theology.<sup>24</sup> Simagine puts forward a notion of social imaginaries that borrows from and expands on the notion that Charles Taylor develops in his work.<sup>25</sup> According to Taylor, social imaginaries are 'pictures' that provide us with "a sense of the normal expectations that we have of each other; the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices which make up our social life."<sup>26</sup> Taylor goes on to assert that social imaginaries are "largely unstructured and inarticulate understandings of our whole situation" that provide a non-theoretical grasp "on the common repertory" necessary for common practice, a practice which, in turn, "carries the understanding."<sup>27</sup> Building on Dilip Gaonkar's account, Simagine member Stijn Latré defines social imaginaries as "'ways of understanding the social that become social entities themselves, mediating collective life' (Gaonkar 2002, p. 4). These 'ways of understanding' are not to be understood as intellectual, philosophical so to speak 'objective' or 'third person' points of view. Social imaginaries are 'implicit understandings that underlie and make possible common practices.'"<sup>28</sup> This relationship between the understanding of the social and the social practice that Latré inherits from Gaonkar, in which the background for understanding becomes a social entity in itself, is helpful in identifying the complex link between understanding and practice that exists at the heart of liberation theology. Liberation theology, as lived theology, can thus be identified as a common, future-oriented practice that is inextricably linked to a common understanding of the world.

Simagine Consortium's work on social imaginaries has focused, among other things, on this notion's relation to the realities of globalization, decoloniality, and epistemic justice. To achieve this goal, Simagine's scholarly work has considered the dialogue of social imaginaries with philosophical, theological, sociological, and anthropological developments outside North America and Europe, paying particular attention to how the notion of social imaginaries can form a bridge between the Western tradition of thought on the one hand, and emergent yet marginalized ways of thinking on the other.<sup>29</sup> Simagine's working definition of social imaginaries responds to this objective, stating that a shared understanding of the world answers to "implicit images, pictures, stories, expectations, and anticipations" as opposed to a "mere cognitive frame of reference."<sup>30</sup> This way of understanding the formative role played by social imaginaries creates space for alternative approaches and perspectives that consider imagination to be a feature of worldview and lifeway formation which receives prior shape and direction from a traditional heritage, even as the active and critical appropriation of that heritage develops new ways to carry its spirit and the imagination it shapes forward.

In the introduction to Simagine's *Social Imaginaries in the Globalizing World*, Hans Alma and Guido Vanheeswijck conceptualize social imaginaries as a "collective noun" in response to contexts characterized by a phenomenon of *super-diversity*. Alma and Vanheeswijck



claim that “contemporary Western culture showcases a super-diversity that does not allow for one single picture or social imaginary,” but that its imaginative framework “can only be understood by reference to social imaginaries in the plural.”<sup>31</sup> For Alma and Vanheeswijck, this is particularly relevant when attempting to understand the complex blend of secular and religious imaginaries still operative in many Western settings today. While the argument emerges from these authors’ response to Taylor’s idea of the immanent frame, which they claim can only be understood in reference to a plurality of secular imaginaries, it can also be extrapolated to settings beyond the Global North, such as Latin America, where due to ethnic and cultural diversity, hybridity, and strife—or super-diversity—the presence of competing secular and religious imaginaries is readily recognizable. This understanding of social imaginaries proves particularly helpful in explaining how the multiple backgrounds of understanding shaping the theological imagination of the diverse Latin American communities at the heart of this analysis coincide in a lived theology of liberation.

#### 4. Social Imagination at the Heart of Ecclesial Base Communities

This second birth has to do, as well, with being able to sense a capacity, a power, a mobilizing freedom to create on our own, to think on our own, to see, to attend, to open up on our own—a capacity that was not recognizable or given to us before. This is, in Cecilia’s words, recognizing for and giving to oneself, certain ‘dignity’. That is why in her testimonial Cecilia tells us that, if prior to her encounter she used to walk with her eyes closed, somewhat desensitized to the world and to what it really meant to share, the reading of the Bible in the *Casitas* group, as well as its members’ ways of relating to one another, made her feel her own capacity, her power to interrogate herself about her own life in relation to others, to resist the life she was living. She recognized then that her life could be transformed and that this meant assuming a different relationship to her community.

—Manrique and Quintana, “Del ir a devenir entre el texto y la vida”<sup>32</sup>

The basic units of community life informed by liberation theology, Ecclesial base communities, are intentional groups dedicated to socially informed biblical reflection in local contexts. These communities look specifically to the scriptural and traditional resources of Christianity for images and stories to ground their collective lives, create horizons of action, and frame the ways in which their members “acknowledge their *worth*.”<sup>33</sup> In particular, the notion of justice as expressed in biblical narratives is central to their imaginaries, as liberation theology’s emphasis on action stems from the liberating message of these narratives, understood as a response to the colonial oppression and violence experienced throughout Latin America.<sup>34</sup> In contexts of oppression and violence, the critical voice of the Ecclesial base communities is often expressed through the direct ethical assessments and pointed calls to action of the community’s survivors, who consider the community a space in which to be reborn.<sup>35</sup> The above excerpt from Colombian philosophers Laura Quintana and Carlos Manrique’s ethnographical analysis of testimonials by members of the Ecclesial base community *Casitas Bíblicas* (Bogotá, Colombia) provides a glimpse into this dynamic of ethical valuation and human mobilization.<sup>36</sup> Such judgments and tasks emerge from the group’s history of scriptural interpretation and social engagement, codifying the learnings, questions, and commands contained in the relevant scriptural passages and mobilizing their members accordingly. In turn, the community’s scriptural interpretation is enriched by the community’s enactment of those principles. This interpretive cycle, or, in Quintana and Manrique’s words, this “go and return” (*ir y devenir*), is sustained by two deep intuitions: (1) that scriptural texts provide a helpful orientation for current ethical practices; and (2) that, as citizens, community members’ lives inform the reading of the texts.

Ricoeur’s examination of scriptural texts and their mobilizing power provides a helpful framework for what Quintana and Manrique identify as “go and return,” through his understanding of scriptural call. In his essay “The Self in the Mirror of the Scriptures,”

Ricoeur develops a key distinction between two kinds of human responses to textual prompts: the first is best illustrated by the philosophical realm and the second by the scriptural realm.<sup>37</sup> Whereas in philosophical discourse a response provides an answer to a *question*, in the biblical context a response addresses a *call*. This link between *call* and response is particularly relevant to Ecclesial base communities as their interpretive practice is in itself a response to the scriptural *call* to build a reconciled and just world, one that is particularly salient for survivors of oppression and violence. Deciphering the direction that a given biblical *call* provides to action is an ambiguous process, as scriptural narratives do not often contain straightforward commands to act in specific ways. Even in the seemingly clearest cases, the reader's response emerges from an interplay of several levels of interpretation, both within layers of the text and between the text and the reality of the reader. Therefore, biblical narratives enter into a dialectical relation with the reader's context, triggering an interpretive process that is fueled by the textual narrative and its internal intricacies, and shaped by the interpreter's inarticulate background.<sup>38</sup> The response to the scriptural *call* must, therefore, be the result of a "dynamic activity that is not confined to repeating significations fixed forever, but which takes place as a prolonging of the itineraries of meaning opened up by the work of interpretation."<sup>39</sup>

The critical reflection on scriptural content that takes place within Ecclesial base communities such as the *Casitas Bíblicas* emerges from the intricate exchange between a number of texts (scriptural, devotional, and popular) and the common understandings shared by the community. Through this intricate exchange, community members collectively interpret and reinterpret the scriptural narratives in order to distill definite calls to action, whose coherence emerges from the social imaginaries of the community. They engage the interpretive process openly, recognizing the existential orientation they discover in the text, which they must then appropriate for themselves through interpretation and action. Careful engagement with the text, its history, and the reality of the community provide a framework for understanding their reality as well as a direction for transformative action.<sup>40</sup>

In his conclusion Part I of *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur makes a brief excursus into "an intermediate level of reference between the poles of individual memory and collective memory, where concrete exchanges operate between the living memory of individual persons and the public memory of the communities to which we belong."<sup>41</sup> Ricoeur's suggestions with respect to this third level of memory afford him the opportunity to include the category of "one's close relations" as a significant location of memory attestation. I argue that a consideration of this third space between individual and collective memory provides a helpful framework for understanding the type of memory retrieval that informs Ecclesial base communities' scriptural interpretation. They become spaces in which individuals intimately related to one another are disposed to be affected by a text with which they are closely related, as they stand within a shared history of interpretation, and attempt to respond to a pressing shared reality. Hence, community members are capable of engaging scriptural texts that have been used to enact oppression and to critically transform—or even subvert—them into tools for liberation through the "go and return" between the text and their lived reality. This attitude of critical hope is a crucial element in liberation theology as a lived theology, as well as the role it plays in the continual renewal of common understandings of what it means to be human in contexts of oppression and violence.

In his seminal work *Ecclesiology: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, Leonardo Boff outlines a vision for the Ecclesial base community as "a community of sisters and brothers simply living one and the same faith in the spontaneous worship of Christ in the midst of humanity, and in disinterested service of and concern for the needs of each member."<sup>42</sup> In a work that blurs the lines between description and prescription, Boff argues that the base communities are small human collectives able to reimagine and mobilize themselves against all odds,<sup>43</sup> made up of people of good will (deeply aware of their need to enact justice and called to respond collectively to the systemic injustices that abound in their contexts). These alternative communities bear deep resemblances with the structures under

which devotional life already existed in Latin America prior to the mid-twentieth century Catholic renewal, as illustrated by the example of the *Novenas de Aguinaldos*. Such renewal, however, allowed members of these communities to see their vision as fundamental to the revitalization of their churches and civic communities in light of the transformative call of the Second Vatican Council.

Ecclesial base communities often have foundational documents that outline the community's shared memory and vision, and conclude with a contextual response to the scriptural message, that is, with a concrete call to action. Such foundational documents often curate and reflect on the community's past, both historical and scriptural, as they assess the community's reality and its potential for transformation. Because of its organic development within close-knit communities of friends and relatives, this process of memory retrieval is tightly linked to the social imaginaries that galvanize and mobilize local communities. Base communities thus create narratives that expand the church's perception of self through local practices, memories, and aspirations shared as the inarticulate background on which theological discourses are articulated.

For Boff, base communities provide a nodal point for the exercise of liberation theology, allowing the church to remember what it has been called to do when facing new realities. The key role that these communities play in facilitating conversation between collective and individual understandings of Christianity allows them to become ideal spaces for reading scriptural narratives faithfully yet critically. The polarity between individual memory and collective memory is not only addressed by the inner development of the realm of "one's close relations" (in which attestation takes place), but by this realm's interaction with the ways of being and knowing shared by the group. Therefore, the critical ferment created by the attestation and approval within the group and sustained by the social imaginary shared by the group has the potential to mobilize the community members to action.

Considering Manrique and Quitana's exploration and Boff's conceptualization, it is possible to assert that Ecclesial base communities are better understood as a shared space for biblical interpretation and biblically inspired practice which includes the following: (1) clearly identifiable linguistic articulations of religious narratives and traditions; (2) personal and social practices emanating from religious commitments; and (3) often opaque and inarticulate processes of personal and community transformation that are part of the religious experience of the person and the community. Through this combination of articulate–inarticulate understanding and practice, Ecclesial base communities' lived theology of liberation points once again to the reality of social imaginaries explored in previous sections of this paper: the common, yet latent, understandings of what it means to be human for many communities in Latin America. These social imaginaries constitute the ground on which the shared reflection of Ecclesial base communities rests, the vistas that provide them with a sense of direction, and the force that ultimately propels them to action.

## 5. Conclusions

Utilizing Ricoeur's exploration and articulation of cultural imagination, this paper provided a philosophical framework to understand liberation theology as the lived theology of Ecclesial base communities, identifying key aspects of the multifaceted origins and development of this lived theology. Simagine's understanding of social imaginaries in diverse settings helped to adjust Ricoeur's conceptualization to the diverse reality of Latin America. Through the contributions of Ricoeur and Simagine, I argued that liberation theology constitutes the background of understandings of Ecclesial base communities, which provides an existential orientation through which Latin Americans can, *à la* Ricoeur, give coherence to their collective action and recognize their own capacity to change their reality of oppression.

Proposing the notion of 'lived theology' as a descriptive starting point thus yielded a better understanding of the emergence and evolution of liberation theology as a set of social imaginaries operative at many levels in Latin America. Through this enlarged lens, devotional practices such as the *Novenas de Aguinaldos*—which I described at the



beginning of this paper—can be better understood as expressions of the social imaginaries in question. The *Novena*'s emphasis on the role of poor—which echoes the significance of the weakness of the infant Jesus and his family—shares resemblances to other aspects of the Latin American religious experience as lived out by members of Ecclesial base communities. Performative elements of the *Novenas*, such as the fact that they do not require clergy leadership or supervision, also speak of resemblances to liberation theology worth further examination.

Throughout this exploration, I have illustrated how understanding liberation theology as a lived theology allows one to consider the implicit and explicit images that provide Ecclesial base communities with common grounds, motivations, and orientations,<sup>44</sup> as well as to recognize the relationships and practices that give cohesion to their members. When taken as articulations of a lived theology, and not merely expressions of an academic enterprise, documents such as the ethnographic accounts provided by Manrique and Quintana and the prescriptive outlines provided by Boff become revelatory of voices within liberation theology that are not otherwise audible. This enlarged lens is a step in reconceptualizing liberation theology so that we can recognize the multiplicity of voices, perspectives, and religious experiences that contribute to its ongoing development.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See [St. Benedict Parish](#) (n.d.). Original Spanish: “Desechados por los hombres y viéndose sin abrigo, María y José han salido de la inhospitalaria población, y se han refugiado en una gruta que se encontraba al pie de la colina . . . El Divino Niño, desconocido por sus criaturas va a tener que acudir a los irracionales para que calienten con su tibio aliento la atmósfera helada de esa noche de invierno, y le manifiesten con esto su humilde actitud, el respeto y la adoración que le había negado Belén . . . La multitud de ángeles que descienden del cielo a contemplar esa maravilla sin par, deja estallar su alegría y hace vibrar en los aires las armonías de esa ‘Gloria in Excelsis,’ que el eco de adoración que se produce en torno el trono del Altísimo hecha perceptible por un instante a los oídos de los pobres de la tierra.”
- <sup>2</sup> While Colombia's liberation from Spanish control—and its evolution into the administrative space that it is today—is a long process that spans over several decades, it is possible to identify the Declaration of Independence (1810) and the surrender of the Spanish troops (1819) as seminal moments in this process.
- <sup>3</sup> Multiple examples of the relevance of the Latin American context to the emergence of liberation theology can be found in the compilation of the documents produced in the context of the 1968 CELAM meeting in Medellín. See ([Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano \(CELAM\) 1968](#); [Colonnese 1970](#), pp. 21–22), in which the bishops welcome Latin Americans to the Conference with the following words: “[W]e welcome you with souls filled with gratitude and hearts filled with joy. We receive with elation the pilgrim of peace . . . ; you, a pilgrim along the crucial road of Latin American history, whose light shines brightly in the current hour of darkness.”
- <sup>4</sup> The Second Vatican Council represented a renewal in Roman Catholicism. For an overview of such renewal, see [Lavin \(2012\)](#), pp. 1–12), see also [Rush \(2004\)](#), pp. 1–35).
- <sup>5</sup> [Levine \(1990a\)](#), p. 603).
- <sup>6</sup> See [Levine \(1990a\)](#), pp. 604–5).
- <sup>7</sup> [Levine \(1988\)](#), pp. 241–46); [Levine \(1990b\)](#), pp. 229–46); [McGovern \(1989\)](#); [Planas \(1986\)](#); [Rubenstein and Roth \(1989\)](#); [Yoder \(1990\)](#), pp. 285–96).
- <sup>8</sup> See [Levine \(1990a\)](#), p. 618).
- <sup>9</sup> By foundational texts I mean the Christian scriptures, other traditional Christian texts, the concluding documents of the Second Vatican Council ([Flannery 1995](#)), and the summary of the 1968 Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín (CELAM, “Documento Conclusivo: Segunda Conferencia Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano” (Medellín, Colombia: Centro Bíblico Teológico Pastoral para América Latina y el Caribe)). While there are many other texts that would later on become seminal to the liberation theology tradition, these three are the sources from which the first articulations of Latin American liberation theology emerged.

According to Ricoeur, in its healthiest expressions, utopian subversion dialectically implies ideological integration in an exchange that sustains and propels social imagination. For a detailed description of this exchange, see Ricoeur (2007, p. 322).

Ricoeur (1986, p. 312).

Boff and Boff (1985, 1986); Gutierrez (1987, 1988); Segundo (1976).

See Boff (1986, pp. 6–9).

See Gutierrez (1988); Boff and Boff and Boff (1986).

This is particularly evident in the areas of pedagogy (Freire 1970); philosophy (Dussel 1985); social organization (Harnecker 2002); and economy (Marcos L. Linares' Economy of Solidarity).

Religious leaders such as Camilo Torres (Colombia), Óscar Romero (El Salvador), and Ernesto Cardenal (Nicaragua) are salient examples of this connection.

DuBose (2023).

For a detailed articulation of the practice of rendering philosophically audible the testimonials of victims of oppression and violence, see Part 2 of Acosta López (2021, pp. 139–36).

Ricoeur (1986, p. 308).

Ricoeur refers to his formulation of the ideology–utopia dialectic as a “theory of cultural imagination.” See Ricoeur (1986, p. 2).

Ricoeur recognizes that ideology and utopia, understood as the forces that drive and shape cultural imagination, can have healthy and unhealthy expressions. In their healthy expressions, ideology and utopia provide coherence and innovation, respectively, and in their unhealthy expressions they devolve into self-legitimation and endless subversion. For a concise articulation of this dynamic, see Ricoeur (1986, pp. 308–24).

Ricoeur (1988, 1992).

Ricoeur (1995, Parts 1, 3, and 5).

Simagine Consortium Homepage, available online: <https://simagineconsortium.com> (accessed on 1 February 2023).

For a succinct description of social imaginaries by Taylor (1997, x: social imaginaries are “the repertoire of means available to understand how we relate to others in society”).

Taylor (2007, p. 172).

Taylor (2007, p. 173).

Latré (2018, p. 49).

Some of the works of Simagine Consortium have been collected in the following two volumes: Alma and Vanheeswijck (2018); and ten Kate and van den Hemel (2019) (special edition under the title “Religion, Community, Borders: Social Imaginaries and the Challenge of Pluralism”).

Alma and Vanheeswijck (2018, pp. 5–6).

Alma and Vanheeswijck (2018, p. 3).

Manrique and Quintana (2019, pp. 228–29, My Translation). Original Spanish: “Este segundo nacimiento tiene que ver asimismo con poder sentir una capacidad, un poder, una movilidad, una “libertad” de hacer por sí mismo, de pensar por sí mismo, de visión, de atención, de apertura, que antes no se reconocía o se otorgaba, y que es también, como lo afirma Cecilia, el reconocimiento para sí, el otorgarse a sí, una cierta “dignidad”. Por eso, en su testimonio Cecilia nos dice que si antes de su encuentro con el proceso caminaba con los ojos cerrados, inmunizada un poco al mundo y a lo que verdaderamente significa compartir, el impacto de cómo leían la Biblia en las Casitas, y de cómo se relacionaban allí los participantes, le hizo sentir su propia capacidad, su poder para interrogarse sobre su propia vida en su relación con los otros, y para darse cuenta, por ejemplo, de que no tenía que vivir como estaba viviendo, de que su vida podía ser transformada y de que esto implicaba también asumir de otra manera la experiencia en comunidad.”

Taylor (1994, p. 64).

For a standard account of liberation theology’s emphasis on responses to the oppressive and violent practices, see Gutierrez (1987, pp. xv–xvii).

See Torres and Eagleson (1982).

For a philosophical analysis of the nature of these ethical assessments and calls to action in the context of a concrete base Community, see Manrique and Quintana (2019, pp. 224–34).

See Ricoeur (2011, pp. 55–60).

For Ricoeur, this process can be structured in three layers: first, biblical images enlarge the meaning ascribed to given terms through narrational or metaphorical tools, inviting the mind of the reader to move beyond the confines of the context at hand. Secondly, such images are linked with images contained in other biblical stories through strong intertextual connections (which can be seen both in unacknowledged references and in explicit quotes of other narratives in the text). Thirdly, the biblical text has been subject to and is the result of a long history of interpretation, appropriation, and re-interpretation in which aspects of

diverse human contexts have become constitutive of the narrative's interpretive history, at the same time that such history has become a referent for the reader's imaginative life.

<sup>39</sup> Ricoeur (1995, p. 145).

<sup>40</sup> For a helpful survey of a few of Ecclesial base communities and the ways in which they effectively mobilize their members to social action, see Nepstad (2019, pp. 95–12); and Azevedo (1987).

<sup>41</sup> Ricoeur (2004, p. 131).

<sup>42</sup> Boff (1986, p. 9, My emphasis).

<sup>43</sup> Boff (1986, p. 6), "when we say that the basic communities cannot hope to constitute a global alternative to the institutional church, we are not underestimating their genuine value for a renewal of the fabric of the church. We are merely seeking to situate their significance and meaning within the church globally. Without a doubt these communities can be a stimulus for mobilizing new strength in the institutional church, and they represent a call for a more thorough living of the authentically communitarian values of the Christian message."

<sup>44</sup> In this formulation I borrow Ricoeur's understanding of imagination as formulated in his chapter "Imagination in Discourse and in Action": "Imagination offers the common space for the comparison and mediation of terms as heterogeneous as the force that pushes as if from behind, the attraction that seduces as if from in front, and the reasons that legitimate and form ground as if from beneath." Ricoeur (2007, pp. 177–78).

## References

- Acosta López, María del Rosario. 2021. From Aesthetics as Critique to Grammars of Listening: On Reconfiguring Sensibility as a Political Task. *Journal of World Philosophies* 6: 139–36.
- Alma, Hans, and Guido Vanheeswijck, eds. 2018. *Social Imaginaries in a Globalizing World*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Azevedo, Marcelo. 1987. *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil. The Challenge of a New Way of Being Church*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Boff, Leonardo. 1986. *Ecclesiology: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*. Translated by Robert R. Barr. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- Boff, Leonardo, and Clodovis Boff. 1985. *Liberation theology: From Dialogue to Confrontation*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Boff, Leonardo, and Clodovis Boff. 1986. *Liberation and Theology: Introducing Liberation theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Colonnese, Louise M. 1970. *The Church in The Present-Day: Transformation of Latin America in The Light of the Council*. Bogota: General Secretariat of CELAM.
- Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM). 1968. *Documento Conclusivo: Segunda Conferencia Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano*; Medellín: Centro Bíblico Teológico Pastoral para América Latina y el Caribe. Available online: [http://www.celam.org/conferencia\\_medellin.php](http://www.celam.org/conferencia_medellin.php) (accessed on 1 February 2023).
- DuBose, Todd. 2023. Lived Theology. In *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*. Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer. Available online: [https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-1-4614-6086-2\\_390](https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-1-4614-6086-2_390) (accessed on 1 February 2023).
- Dussel, Enrique. 1985. *Liberation Philosophy*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Flannery, Austin. 1995. *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*. Northport: Costello Publishing Company.
- Freire, Paulo. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Gutierrez, Gustavo. 1987. *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Gutierrez, Gustavo. 1988. *A Theology of Liberation*. Revised Edition from 1971 Original, Teología de la Liberación. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Harnecker, Marta. 2002. *Sin Tierra: Construyendo un Movimiento Social*. Madrid: Siglo XXI de España.
- Latré, Stijn. 2018. Social Imaginaries: A Conceptual Analysis. In *Social Imaginaries in a Globalizing World*. Edited by Hans Alma and Guido Vanheeswijck. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Lavin, Margaret. 2012. *Vatican II: Fifty Years of Evolution and Revolution in the Catholic Church*. Toronto: Novalis.
- Levine, Daniel H. 1988. Assessing the Impacts of Liberation theology in Latin America. *Review of Politics* 50: 241–46. [CrossRef]
- Levine, Daniel H. 1990a. Considering Liberation theology as Utopia. *The Review of Politics* 52: 603–20. [CrossRef]
- Levine, Daniel H. 1990b. How Not to Understand Liberation theology, Nicaragua, or Both. *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 32: 229–46. [CrossRef]
- Manrique, Carlos E., and Laura Quintana. 2019. Del ir y venir entre el texto y la vida. Avatares filosóficos en un barrio popular de Bogotá. *Philosophical Readings* 9: 224–34.
- McGovern, Arthur. 1989. *Liberation Theology and Its Critics. Toward an Assessment*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Nepstad, Sharon Erickson. 2019. Liberation theology and the Central America Solidarity Movement. In *Catholic Social Activism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Planas, Ricardo. 1986. *Liberation Theology: The Political Expression of Religion*. Kansas City: Sheed & Ward.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1986. *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*. Edited by George H. Taylor. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1988. *Time and Narrative, Volume 3*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1992. *Oneself as Another*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1995. *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

- Ricoeur, Paul. 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 2007. *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 2011. El Sí en el Espejo de las Escrituras. In *Amor y Justicia*. Translated by Tomás Domingo Moratalla. Madrid: Editorial Trotta.
- Rubenstein, Richard, and John K. Roth, eds. 1989. *The Politics of Liberation Theology: A Challenge to U.S. Policy*. Washington, DC: Washington Institute Press.
- Rush, Ormond. 2004. *Still Interpreting Vatican II, Some Hermeneutical Principles*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Segundo, Juan Luis. 1976. *The Liberation of Theology*. Translated by John Drury. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- St. Benedict Parish. n.d. Colombian Christmas Novena to the Child Jesus. Canandaigua. Available online: <https://files.ecatholic.com/14273/documents/2016/12/NOVENA%20DE%20AGUINALDOS%201.pdf?t=1481722990000> (accessed on 1 February 2023).
- Taylor, Charles. 1994. The Politics of Recognition. In *Multiculturalism (Expanded Paperback Edition)*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 25–73.
- Taylor, Charles. 1997. *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- ten Kate, Laurens, and Ernst van den Hemel. 2019. Religion, Community, Borders: Social Imaginaries and the Challenge of Pluralism. *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 5: 259–81. [CrossRef]
- Torres, Sergio, and John Eagleson, eds. 1982. *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Yoder, John. 1990. The Wider Setting of 'Liberation theology'. *Review of Politics* 52: 285–96. [CrossRef]

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.