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# De-Homogenizing Liberation Theologies in the Catalog and on the Shelves

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**ABSTRACT:** Liberation theologies are not monolithic, varying widely across geography and denominations. That rich diversity, however, is rarely reflected in the catalog with subject headings, or on the shelves with limited classification options. This paper discusses a project undertaken by the authors to address significant gaps in the representation of Liberation Theology in the catalog and stacks. First, the authors supplemented existing subject headings with geographic, denominational, and historical context to improve the search, discovery, and assessment experience for patrons within the catalog. Second, they developed a local expansion of the official Library of Congress Classification for Liberation theology (BT83.57) with subclassifications, including General works (.A1), General Catholic works (.A2), General Protestant works (.A3), and By region or country (.A4-Z). In the conclusion, the authors reflect on the challenges of the project, future steps, and methods of applying this process to other areas of theological study.

## INTRODUCTION

In February 2024, it was brought to the attention of Bilingual Reference and Acquisitions Librarian, Déborah Ortiz-Rivera, that researchers at Pitts Theology Library were having issues assessing whether the resources they were finding on Liberation Theology were appropriate for their work. Determined to uncover the cause, Ortiz-Rivera began a survey of the catalog records for core works of Liberation Theology and quickly realized that there was something lacking. For almost every record she came across, the subject analysis failed to provide any additional context for the geographic,

denominational, and/or historical situation in which the material was being presented.

Liberation Theology originally manifested in the works of Catholic priests and theologians across Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s. Its application and processes were deeply entrenched in the contextual socio-political realities of each country and their effects on Christian praxis. Although the Catholic bishops formed a united front in presenting their ideas to the Catholic Church and the world, their individual work kept the context of their own ministries at the center. For example, the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez reflected the challenges of extreme poverty that pervaded the lives of his parishioners in Peru. The martyrdom of five Jesuit priests and the two women that served their house in El Salvador impacted Jon Sobrino's meditations on Christology.

As it is classified now, Liberation Theology is stripped of much of that important context, particularly in relation to neighboring theologies. Hispanic American Theology originated in the United States during the 1970s, coinciding with the first works of Liberation Theology in Latin America.<sup>1</sup> Even when there was collaboration and exchange of ideas, each theology developed its own methodology and approach to the problem of oppression. Still, some works that belong in one category are classified in the other and vice versa.

The denominational lens of the theologians is particularly important for contextualizing works of Liberation Theology. While Catholic theologians drove the development of Liberation Theology, Protestants pastors and theologians, such as Methodist José Míguez Bonino in Chile (1924-2012), and Presbyterian Rubem Alves in Brazil (1933-2014) made important contributions as well. Their ecumenical work was remarkable considering the historic differences among Catholics and Protestants in Latin America. The denominational/confessional approach of the authors mark important divergences, and clearly differentiating the contributions of Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal writers is a key element to adequately describe the resources.

In the same way that denomination plays an important role in understanding works about Liberation Theology, the historical and geographical contexts are also critical. History plays a major role in how liberation theologians define oppression and poverty, often

stressing the history of colonization with its consequences in Latin America. Additionally, the socio-political history of each country is important to consider, such as the wars and guerrilla operations in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Colombia. These events are often interpreted through the lens of the struggle for liberation and should be included as subjects in the description of works that are influenced by or were created in response to them.

To address the shortcomings of the existing catalog records for works on Liberation Theology, Ortiz-Rivera partnered with the Cataloging and Metadata Librarian, Brinna Michael, to implement two changes. First, the subject analysis in relevant bibliographic records would be assessed and updated to include clear information about the geographic, denominational, and historical context of the work in question, providing a more robust description for users who are interested in Liberation Theology. Second, Michael would develop an expansion of the existing Library of Congress Classification (LCC) for Liberation Theology (BT83.57) to include subclassifications that reflect denominational and geographic variation more definitively in the stacks. To realize these goals, a review of library holdings was necessary.

## REVIEW PROCESS

The first step in reviewing the Liberation Theology holdings was to generate a report using Alma Analytics. Works were identified by the inclusion of *Liberation theology* as a subject in a 650 field in the bibliographic record, AND/OR the permanent call number in the holding record being either BT83.57 (Liberation theology), BT83.575 (Hispanic American theology), or BT83.583 (Mujerista theology). By including all records that have the *Liberation theology* subject, materials that would show up in a keyword or subject search in the catalog would be included in the report. Additionally, works from the Hispanic American theology and Mujerista theology classifications were included as they often have significant thematic and geographic overlap with the works of Liberation Theology. The final report included 851 bibliographic records from 322 different classifications. To facilitate assessment, the report included the local unique identifier (MSS Id), title(s), author(s) and contributor(s), all

subjects (65X fields), publisher, publication date, place of publication, ISBN, notes (500 field), and summary (520 field).

Between February and June 2024, 153 of the 851 records were rigorously reviewed using an intensive process of, for all intents and purposes, completely reassessing the subject analysis of each individual work. This process included reviewing each work with a copy in hand or using a version found through Google Books or on Internet Archive, assessing the contributor(s) and subject coverage, and making detailed notes of what critical contextual information was missing from the current record. The result of this process was that 124 of the identified records had suggestions for contextual subjects to be added. Additionally, five categories became evident which could be used to inform future review.

The first of these categories is seminal works of Liberation Theology. These include the core publications of notable theologians and philosophers who worked to originally develop Liberation Theology. Some examples include the works of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino, and Juan Luis Segundo. These men, among others, are considered fathers of the movement and their writings inspired further development of the core tenets of Liberation Theology as it grew beyond the Catholic and Latin American contexts.

Non-Latin American works which contextualize, critique, or expand on Liberation Theology make up the second category. This category includes works which apply the concepts of Liberation Theology to geographic and socio-political regions outside of the Latin American context, as well as works by theologians and authors responding to the tenets of Liberation Theology. An example would be some works by German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, who adapted the ideas of Liberation Theology in developing his “theology of hope.”

Additionally, works such as *Leave the Temple: Indian Paths to Human Liberation*, edited by Felix Wilfred, fit into this category on the grounds that they apply the concepts of Liberation Theology in a different geographic context—in this case, India.

The third category consists of works which explore the history and development of Liberation Theology. *Hanging on and Rising Up: Renewing, Re-envisioning, and Rebuilding the Cross from the “Marginalized,”* by Patricia Cuyatti Chávez, is included in this category

on the basis that Chávez's work explores the historical context that gave rise to the development of Gustavo Gutiérrez's Liberation Theology. This category is for works which frame the context, history, and development of Liberation Theology, rather than investigating the concepts and ideas of Liberation Theology.

Works focusing on the lives and work of notable contributors to the development of Liberation Theology constitute the fourth category. This might include biographies, historical reviews of the theology of a particular contributor, and/or reflections on the involvement of a contributor's theology to a broader movement or context. This category distinguishes between works about a particular theologian or philosopher as a person, rather than the conceptual work of a specific theologian or philosopher.

Finally, the fifth category includes works on other theologies which incorporate, were influenced by, or expand upon Liberation Theology. This includes works on Black Theology, Postcolonial Theology, Feminist Theology, and more, which might address the impact or influence of Liberation Theology, but are primarily about a different theological tradition. An example of such a work is *Faith in the Face of Militarization: Indigenous, Feminist, and Interreligious Voices*, edited by Jude Lal Fernando, which includes essays which draw on Liberation Theology concepts, but focus on a broader range of theological responses to militarization.

## **SUBJECT UPDATES**

Based on the categories and initial subject suggestions, the authors determined guidelines for supplementing and/or updating existing subject headings. All the categories will have at least one geographic subject or subdivision added if none is already present. In some cases, multiple geographic headings may be appropriate. For records that already have one or more geographic subjects, additional headings may be added for specificity or refinement. Additionally, all the categories will have a denominational subject added if none is present. This is particularly important for delineating between Catholic and broadly Protestant works, however more specific Protestant denominations may be added if relevant. One example of this may

be the Pentecostal or Holiness denomination(s), which have seen a recent increase in application of Liberation Theology ideas.

In addition to these overarching guidelines, several of the categories were determined to need additional subject adjustments. For seminal works, the authors identified the importance of historical context to the development and understanding of these burgeoning theological ideas. Therefore, subjects will be added, as necessary, to provide clear and relevant historical context. For example, a work that was written in response to the Second Lateran Council would include the heading, *Vatican Council (Second): 1962–1965: Basilica di San Pietro in Vaticano*, and a work produced during the civil war in El Salvador would include the heading, *El Salvador—History—Civil War, 1979–1992*.

Works in the second and fifth categories (Non-Latin American works and works on other theologies) will either have the existing *Liberation theology* subject modified, or have a new subject added as *Liberation theology—Latin America—Influence*. This change will make it clear that these works are not necessarily part of the core, seminal works that make up the “canon” of Liberation Theology, but rather incorporate, reinterpret, criticize, and/or expand on those ideas. Making this distinction clear in the subject coverage means that users searching the catalog will have an easier time making informed decisions on the applicability of a work to their research.

For works in the fourth category (contributors to Liberation Theology), the authors determined that it was important to modify the existing *Liberation theology* heading, or add one as *Liberation theology—Contributors*, thereby clarifying the specific role Liberation Theology plays in the work as a theme. To expand on this, the geographic subject, whether it was being added anew or already existed, would be adapted to use *Theologians—[country]*, which places the emphasis on the person while providing the geographic context of their contribution. As mentioned in relation to previous additions and modifications, by specifically identifying that certain works are focused on a person, rather than the ideas and concepts that make up Liberation Theology, a user can quickly ascertain if a resource is relevant to their search.

## (RE)CLASSIFICATION

The first step in addressing the limitations of classification was to establish a local expansion of the existing LC classification for Liberation Theology. Currently, there is a single number (BT83.57) under which all works about Liberation Theology are classed, despite the discipline's complexity and multi-faceted nature. For this project's purposes, the authors determined that following existing practice within the LCC schedules for subclassifications would serve them best. The first rendition of this expansion included three categories of subclassification that were largely focused on creating organizational structure on the shelves through geographic divisions (see table 1). After further review of works and the development of the five categories, this initial expansion was revised to allow for both denominational and geographic organization (see table 1).

**Table 1: Subclassification Expansion to Liberation Theology (BT83.57)**

<b>INITIAL EXPANSION</b>	BT83.57.A-Z BT83.57.A1 BT83.57.A2 BT83.57.A3-Z	Liberation theology General works General special By region or country, A-Z
<b>FINAL EXPANSION</b>	BT83.57.A-Z BT83.57.A1 BT83.57.A2 BT83.57.A3 BT83.57.A4-Z	Liberation theology General works General Catholic works General Protestant works By region or country, A-Z

Once the final expansion of subclassifications was established, the authors identified guidelines for reclassifying or applying new classifications to works based on their placement in the five core categories previously identified (see table 2).

**Table 2: Reclassification Guidelines by Category**

<b>CATEGORY</b>	<b>RECOMMENDED CLASSIFICATION</b>
Seminal works (1)	BT83.57.A-Z
Non-Latin American works (2)	BT83.57.A4-Z BT83.A2-3 (only if denominational focus is more critical)
History and development of Liberation Theology (3)	BT83.57.A1-3 BT83.57.A4-Z (only if geographic focus is more critical)
Contributors to Liberation Theology (4)	Class under the individual (e.g., Leonardo Boff --> BX4668.3.B64)
Theologies related to Liberation Theology (5)	Class under the theology (e.g., Postcolonial theology --> BT83.593)

The authors tested these guidelines on the first 153 reviewed bibliographic records. By default, all works that had been classified under BT83.57 were reclassified into the appropriate subclassification or moved to a different classification, if relevant. The results of this process were that 68 of the 153 records were reclassified, 53 of which were placed in the new BT83.57 subclassification system (see table 3).

**Table 3: Reclassification Results**

CLASSIFICATION	# OF RECORDS
Liberation Theology	53
General works	19
General Catholic works	10
General Protestant works	1
By region or country	23
Non-Liberation Theology classifications	15
Not reclassified	85

An example of a work that was assigned to the “General works” subclassification is *Proclaiming the Acceptable Year*, edited by Justo L. González. This work constitutes a collection of sermons which draw on both Catholic and Protestant approaches to Liberation Theology and were written by authors representing a wide array of geographical regions. As such, it could not be classified into any of the more specific subdivisions.

One example of a work assigned to the Catholic subdivision is *Theology and the Church: A Response to Cardinal Ratzinger and a Warning to the Whole Church*, by Juan Luis Segundo. In this book, Segundo specifically responds to established Catholic doctrine, addressing the work of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as well as the decisions made during the Second Vatican Council. Meanwhile, an example of a work assigned to the Protestant subdivision is *A Preference for the Poor: Latin American Liberation Theology from a Protestant Perspective*, by Manfred K. Bahmann. This is more straightforward, as the title itself indicates that, while the work is a response to Catholic ideas, it is presented from the Protestant perspective.

Most works assigned within the new classification structure were classed by geographic subdivision. One example is *Liberation*



*Theology: Oppression, Politics, Poverty & the Nigerian Church*, edited by Frank Stanislaus, which was assigned the Cutter .N54 for Nigeria, which is the geographic focus of the work. At the same time, several works were reclassified outside of Liberation Theology entirely to better represent the contents. For example, *Jesus Christus und das Gekreuzigte Volk: Christologie der Nachfolge und des Martyriums bei Jon Sobrino*, by Nancy Elizabeth Bedford, was reclassified under Christology (BT202) because the core of the work is Christology, despite the specific focus on responding to notable Liberation theologian Jon Sobrino's Christology.

## CONCLUSION

The project to make subject changes and reclassify works is ongoing, and as work progresses, many challenges have arisen. As with most large-scale projects, there are significant limitations on both staff skills and time. These materials represent a variety of languages, including English, Spanish, German, French, and Portuguese, making assessment more time-consuming for those in languages that the authors do not know. Additionally, there is the challenge of considering the use of "Hispanic American theology" as a subject and the overlap with Liberation Theology. Hispanic American Theology is distinct from Liberation Theology, tending towards a more ecumenical focus. However, there are quite a few materials that cover both theologies, and determining a method for accurately and helpfully representing those works in the catalog and on the shelves still needs to be explored.

As the project moves forward, the focus of the work will be on completing the review of all 851 identified bibliographic records. Once the review is completed, the process of formatting and adding the new subjects, updating existing subjects, and assessing any reclassification needs can begin. The authors are exploring methods to undergo some of that work with batch processing methods, although some will likely need to be completed by hand. Any materials that are determined to need reclassification will also need to be pulled from the shelves, marked with the new call numbers, and reshelved. Throughout this process, the authors intend to diligently document all the processes for internal record and to share with others interested in doing similar projects.

Reflecting on this project-in-progress, there are significant possibilities of recreating these processes for other areas of the catalog as needed, particularly with other theologies that are similarly complex and nuanced. Black theology (BT82.7), Postcolonial theology (BT83.593), and Feminist theology (BT83.55) stand out as subject areas of great interest to seminary students, faculty, and researchers. Each of these theologies' classifications could be expanded to reflect unique contextual needs, and subject reanalysis and remediation could be leveraged to support search and discovery more effectively. Regardless, responding to the needs of users is key.

## **ENDNOTES**

- 1 This refers specifically to the publication of works identified as Hispanic American Theology.

