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A New Paradigm: *Brazilian Catholic Eco-Justice Activism in the Neoliberal Age*

I. Introduction:

The Serra do Brigadeiro Territory is in the heart of the one of the few remaining patches of the Atlantic Forest in Minas Gerais, Brazil. It contains a rural community of small subsistence farmers who pride themselves on their sustainable and small-scale family agriculture and the beauty of their native forests. In 2003, these residents learned of a large number of bauxite concessions in their territory given by the federal government to the prominent *Companhia Brasileira de Alumínio* (CBA), Brazil's largest aluminum producer; the concessions would encompass 6,700 hectares of farmland and forest reserve. Horrified by the prospect of their homeland becoming a barren, strip-mined wasteland, as they saw occur in other parts of Minas Gerais affected by bauxite mining, the community recoiled and launched a campaign to stop the company's efforts. Introduced to the topic by the international conservation NGO and research center, Iracambi, I spent two months in the territory in the summer of 2011, doing ethnographic research on how the community perceived the bauxite mining and how they went about their opposition activism. After just a few days in the area, it became apparent to me that the largest political mobilizer of the community, as well as its spokesperson, was the local Catholic Church.¹

Already passionate about environmental theology, it was providential that I had landed in midst of a group of Brazilians that were voicing their grievances with the corporate mining in both ecological and theological terminology. Unlike in the United States, where these two ideological approaches are often considered antithetical due to

¹ Lena Connor, "'The Earth is Crying Out in Pains of Childbirth.' Bauxite Mining and Sustainable Rural Development in

our polarized political culture, these farmers and priests stitched together a Christian environmental ethic with ease. In some of the large Brazilian cities, liberation theology has lost its influence, as urbanites are drawn to the prosperity and salvation theology of Evangelical, Pentacostal, and Charismatic Catholic congregations. But in rural Minas Gerais, liberation theology was still fervent and integral to the daily lives of this community. It had not stagnated or lost relevance after democratization, but instead had adapted to address the new challenges of neoliberalism and, in particular, the incoming mining. Throughout my interviews, I witnessed members of the community using traditional liberation theology rhetoric about God's aid in escaping oppression and building his kingdom on earth. But unlike in the early stages of liberation theology, the oppressor was the *international corporation* instead of the state and the kingdom of God involved *vibrant ecosystems* that supported family agriculture. As one female farmer named Marinha stated, "[I think that mining] is horrible. Because it will destroy everything we spent such a long time building. Our little farm is small, but it is our dream. Our forests and our water. Our water, which is pure." She continued, "Religion teaches us to preserve things. Things that Mother Nature has given us. So, my head is already against mining. [My religion helps to reinforce it. My religion helps me to be *more* opposed to it.] That's what I think."²

Fascinated by these innovative Christians and their reaction to the industrial modernization of their region (and inspired by the Franciscan priests who led them in their activism), I returned to the United States with an urge to study whether this case study was an anomaly or whether liberation theology was being thus adapted in other places in Brazil. Hence, this paper is a research endeavor into that very question; it will

² Connor, 34, 43.

focus on the role of the Brazilian Catholic Church in political activism and its relationship to ecological preservation and sustainable development. My hypothesis is that though the movement for religiously-motivated environmental action is small and localized, it is nonetheless prevalent in places where ecological degradation accompanies the maltreatment of poor, rural, or indigenous communities, such as in the Amazon region, Northeast Brazil, and the state of Minas Gerais. As neoliberal, free-market development is pushed strongly on Brazil by outside international forces like the IMF and the WTO and is prioritized by Brazilian governmental leaders, the prevalence of ecologically and socially disruptive forces—strip mining, hydroelectric dams, oil pipelines, pervasive logging and forest clearing, and large-scale monoculture agribusiness—have provoked many rural communities to stand up in opposition. And as liberation theology is the strongest in rural areas, due to the lack of influence of the conservative Vatican as well as the lack of other secular NGOs for support, I propose that the church will have a prominent role in many communities in protesting (or at least dealing with) these new changes.

Many theorists are doubtful of the efficacy of religious activism as globalization propels the world into the modern age. As developing countries in Latin America urbanize, scholars cite that secular agents of political mobilization like environmental non-governmental organizations are more prevalent, as they are more effective at participating in the rationalist, economic rhetoric surrounding debates about capitalist development in nations like Brazil. However, as Hans Opschoor emphasizes, though academics in the developed world often dismiss religion as an outdated set of beliefs, scholars should recognize that religion is also a powerful “community of believers” and that, in many cultures, it forms how people cope with and organize life and therefore

has profound development implications.³ Opschoor argues that religions have responded to globalized development in several ways: 1) They are a “source of values relevant in and to processes of social change,” emphasizing notions of justice, rights, and human dignity; 2) Religions are “powerfully fruitful in critiquing dominant powers, in ‘gelatinizing Caesar’ or demystifying idols and structures leading away from [religious] values”; 3) They are a source of “identity to ignored, oppressed, or marginalized peoples” and provide them with material and spiritual resources for combating injustice; 4) Religions help members of society cope with and analyze change in a globalized world; 5) Religions can link faith with a daily work ethic; 6) Religions can provide “practical compassion for those who lack [resources].”⁴

Therefore, in this paper, I will use Opschoor’s theoretical groundwork as both a justification and framework for pursuing my research question. To begin with, I will examine how the genesis of Brazilian ecotheology has contributed to developing Christian values that can address Brazil’s ecological concerns. Then I will analyze how the famous land reform movement (spearheaded by Catholic leaders) served as a critique of the neoliberal powers-that-be and provided a foundation for sustainable development in Brazil. I will particularly concentrate on the Amazonian region, as it is an ecological hotspot and consequently receives international attention. Additionally, I will examine how the church has been active in anti-dam protests throughout Brazil in order to represent the marginalized human and non-human victims of such large projects. I will also briefly outline my own research findings on the Church’s activism in mining protests. Finally, I will survey how the church leaders’ guidance influences

³ Hans (J.B) Opschoor, “‘Wealth of Nations’ or a ‘Common Future’: Religion-based Responses to Unsustainability and Globalization” in Berma Klein Goldewijk, Religion, *International Development and Development Cooperation* (Wageningen, The Netherlands: Wageningen Academic Publishers, 2007), 250.

⁴ Opschoor, 265.

Catholic parishioner's opinions on neoliberal development and environmental protection, using statistical analysis from the World Values Survey.

II. The Brazilian Ecotheology Movement

As W.E. Hewitt argues, it would be mistaken to assume that ecology was *always* part of the mission of liberation theology. While modern Brazilian ecotheologians like Leonardo Boff would argue that an ecological mindset is a natural extension of the premises of liberation theology (namely the Christian duty to fight for the freedom of the oppressed), the original proponents of liberation theology focused on the material improvement of the lives of the poor, not on environmental preservation. Hewitt states that in the first decades of liberation theology, while the church often opposed development projects that perpetuated environmental degradation, they did so because of their commitment to the "preferential option of the poor;" the leaders "made a conscious decision to emphasize the provision of human need over environmental protection, per se."⁵ Yet, as Hewitt admits, their goals often coincided well with goals of preservationists:

Whether in its condemnation of profit-driven development by the government and large agrobusiness, in its support for native people and small landholders, or in the actions of the CEBs in the areas of infrastructural improvement and land reform, the church has both consciously and unconditionally worked to counteract the forces within society that many claim are currently ravaging Brazil's environment.⁶

While the first generation of liberation theologians, like Gustavo Gutierrez and the progressive bishops of the CNBB in the 1960s and 1970s, did not recognize the

⁵ W. E. Hewitt, "The Roman Catholic Church and Environmental Politics in Brazil," *The Journal of Developing Areas*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Jan., 1992), 240.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 255.

connection between poverty and ecological destruction, successive generations of liberation theologians certainly did. Two of the most famous are Ivone Gebara, the renowned Brazilian ecofeminist nun, and Leonardo Boff, one of the world's most esteemed ecotheologians and a household name among progressive Catholics in Brazil. Both saw the shared goals of liberation theologians and environmentalists not as coincidence, but instead as evidence of the deep interconnection between the health of God's creation and human wellbeing.

Ivone Gebara is a religious sister of the Canonesses of St. Augustine. She taught for 14 years at the Catholic Theological Institute in Olinda/Recife, a prominent hub of liberation theology until it was shut down with the conservative shift of the Vatican. As Gebara states in her seminal book, *In Longing for Running Water*, "I have begun to see more clearly how the exclusion of the poor is linked to the destruction of their lands, to the forces that leave them no choice but to move from place to place in a ceaseless exile, to racism, and to the growing militarization of their countries."⁷ As theologian Mary Judith Ress states, "Gebara has since become a self-described nomad; she travels throughout Latin America, giving courses and workshops on feminist and ecofeminist theology to grassroots communities, women's groups, religious communities, and solidarity organizations."⁸ She lives in a slum outside of Recife in northeastern Brazil. Her theology "has been constructed from the daily life of her neighbors, most of whom are poor women."⁹ As Gebara continues,

[My ecofeminism] is based on the experience of those who have diminishing access to green things and clean water; of those who breathe an ever-greater amount of the air pollution that has spread everywhere.

⁷ Mary Judith Ress, *Ecofeminism in Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 125.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

My ecofeminism is pregnant with heath: not health as we might understand it in the past, but the health of the future that promises deeper communion between human being and all other living things.¹⁰

For Gebara and other ecofeminist theologians, they view their work as continuing the tradition of liberation theology by critiquing the oppressive elites, but also as placing such a theology in the context of neoliberal development that is simultaneously degrading the human and non-human communities in Brazil in the name of profit. She calls on other Christians to “return to our roots” and to commune with the earth in order to recognize God’s holiness in all of his Creation and his plan for this planet that transcends the crude material goals of capitalist expansion.¹¹

Leonardo Boff was an active member of the Brazilian liberation theology movement from the very beginning of his career. He joined the Order of the Franciscan Friars Minor in 1959 and received his doctorate in Philosophy and Theology in 1970 from the University of Munich, Germany. For 22 years he was the professor of Systematic and Ecumenical Theology at the Franciscan Theological Institute in Petrópolis. He now serves as professor of Ethics, Philosophy of Religion and Ecology at the State University of Rio de Janeiro. The Vatican silenced Boff for his criticism of the Catholic Church and his work in radical liberation theology, making him a controversial figure in Catholic circles. Most importantly, he is known throughout the world for his ecological liberation theology, outlined in his two most celebrated books, *Cry of the Earth*, *Cry of the Poor* and *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, both written in the mid-1990s. As he argues, “Liberation theology and ecological discourse have something in common: they start from two bleeding wounds.” As we reflect on the wound of poverty

¹⁰ Ress, 125.

¹¹ Ivone Gebara, “The Trinity and Human Experience: An Ecofeminist Perspective,” in Ruether, Rosemary Radford, *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 20-21.

and the wound of ecological destruction, we must recognize that “both lines of reflection and practice have as their starting point a cry: the cry of the poor for life, freedom and beauty (cf. Ex 3:7), and the cry of the Earth groaning under oppression (cf. Rom. 8:22-23).” Both seek liberation, in a new covenant.¹² Boff states that we now “need to ask for a democracy that is not only participatory and social, but ecological.”¹³

Though these quotes sound rather abstract and metaphysical, the majority of Boff’s writing is grounded in an applied analysis of the ecological and social problems in Brazil. Both of his books highlight case studies of Brazilian communities and natural habitats that are being simultaneously injured by Brazil’s relentless quest to grow its GDP in a first world fashion. He highlights that such fundamental adherence to a paradigm of economic growth does not benefit all Brazilians, but instead increases the income gap, abject urban poverty, and violence over resources and land. He calls on Brazil to create a *new paradigm* for sustainable living, one that can sustain Brazil’s rich ecological heritage and all of its peoples.¹⁴ In a lyrical prologue, he assumes the voice of Christ and mimics the Sermon on the Mount stating:

“Blessed and vast land of Latin America! [...] Watch over the forests and mountains, the great Cordillera and the banks of the Amazon, the rivers flowing with water and the deep valleys, the wild animals and the many varieties of birds. They are all your brothers and sisters. Curb your greed. Care for them as my Father cares for them. They will inherit the kingdom. [...] Blessed are those who seek new ways to survive, new forms of production, of communitarian distribution, of consumption by sharing. I

¹² Boff, Leonardo, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 104.

¹³ Boff, Leonardo, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 84.

¹⁴ Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 100-113.

assure you that I will travel with you and that you will find new forms of living together.”¹⁵

As theologian Scott Dunham comments, Boff was the first Brazilian theologian (and simply one of the first theologians in history) to call upon the church community to adopt a language in which to talk about ecosystems in a Christian context. Boff says that we must transform the goals of congregations and the hearts of church members so that practice and liturgy reflect an ecological embrace of all life in creation; we must imbue within the church an understanding about ecological relatedness and the consequences of our actions.¹⁶

Another Brazilian liberation theologian, Guillermo Kerber, explains that while Gebara and Boff started the trend, the rest of the theological community in Brazil (and in Latin America as a whole) is rapidly catching on. To begin with, indigenous theologies are becoming predominant in Brazil and they often make “reference to the land as a key issue, and as a consequence, a new way of relating to the environment.”¹⁷ Also, the relationship between religion and economy is being stressed in Brazil, he comments: “Analyses of the root causes of poverty and their connection with economic models, in particular neoliberalism, have become central.”¹⁸ The work of Boff and Gebara is used by many communities, particularly in rural areas and in the favelas of cities, and is particularly championed by land reform movements.

On a theological level, scholars often meet to discuss ecological themes and are now framing concerns in terms of climate change:

¹⁵ Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 4-5.

¹⁶ Scott Dunham, “Leonardo Boff’s Ecological Theology and Christian Tradition,” *Toronto Journal of Theology*, Vol 23, No 1 (2007), 40.

¹⁷ Guillermo Kerber, “Climate change and southern theologies: a Latin American insight”. *Horizonte*, Vol. 8, No. 17, (April 2010), 50.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

The World Forum on Theology and Liberation, held in Belem, Brazil, at the heart of the Amazonia, in January 2009, focused on the theme: *Water, Earth and Theology for another possible world*. During the debates, the topic of climate change was addressed in different ways: indigenous peoples performing earth- and water-centered rituals, Afro-Brazilian priests presenting African insights to land and water, workshops with people engaged in movements of the landless, and theologians from Latin America and other regions reflecting on different aspects of the topics.”¹⁹

Using Opschoor’s terminology, these theological voices are coming together to create a systematic theology that can be applied by priests and lay leaders to help their parishioners navigate the globalized forces in the 21st century and relate them to Christian objectives.

Even the Catholic hierarchies in the Vatican are calling for an incorporation of environmental care into Christian ethics. As early as 1990, Pope John Paul II said that when "man turns his back on the Creator's plan," he explained, "he provokes a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of created order." Only when humanity has made its peace with God's plan, the pope warned, can peace and harmony within all creation exist. John Paul claimed that the primary cause of our suffering environment today is human vice.²⁰

However, while all of this theology is comprehensive and holistic, is it reaching the average rural Brazilian and influencing their beliefs and practices in a *profound* way? This question directs us to the church’s work on the ground in Brazil and its connection to these high, eco-theological goals.

¹⁹ Kerber, 51.

²⁰ Hewitt, 242.

III. The Brazilian Landless Movement

Over the past fifty years of liberation theology's work in Brazil, land reform is perhaps its most ambitious and successful project. In the 1960s, progressive Catholic leadership observed that the number of people in dire poverty was rising primarily due to the agricultural unemployment caused by increased mechanization of large farms during the Green Revolution. Objecting to this model of economic development that cared little for the average Brazilian's welfare, the church began to mobilize peasants through base communities (*Comunidades Eclesiais de Base*, or CEBs) in order to build a grassroots movement for a redistribution of land from the old elites to the starving, urban and rural poor.²¹ According to political scientist Ricardo Tavares, "priests and bishops sided with the *posseiros* (squatters who work the land but have no legal title) against the *grileiros* (colonists with fraudulent title) and large landowners, in a struggle which often became bloody."²² To date, over 1,000 leaders and their family members have been murdered over land reform. Many of these were associated with church activism. In the late 1970s, the Brazilian bishops began organizing land occupations through the Pastoral Commission on Lands (*Comissão Pastoral da Terra* or the CPT), stating that land was a gift from God and should be available to all his children. According to Wendy Wolford, a political scientist who has devoted her career to studying this movement, the commission is a vast network of clergy, including some bishops, as well as lay people, including theologians, sociologists, and lay workers, often from rural areas, and it has been a proactive school for peasant leaders in all corners of

²¹ Madeleine Adriance, "Base Communities and Rural Mobilization in Northern Brazil". *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (1994), p. 163.

²² Judy Coode, "A Place in the Country," *Sojourners Magazine*, April 2004, <http://www.sojo.net/magazine/2004/04/place-country>, 1.

Brazil.²³ From the CPT emerged the more specified Rural Landless Workers Movement, (*Movimento Dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* or the MST), still powered by church leadership but more proactive in staging land occupations, forming agricultural cooperatives, etc. Over the past few decades the movement has been amazingly successful. According to political scientist Miguel Carter, at last count, an estimated 350,000 families have obtained land through MST struggles, in roughly 1,300 government-sanctioned agricultural settlements. The movement has established 88 cooperatives and 96 food processing plants. In the last two decades, the MST has convinced the Brazilian government to distribute seven million hectares (or 43,000 square miles) –a territory the size of Ireland or the state of Louisiana.²⁴

As neoliberalism expanded in Brazil during the 1990s under President Cardoso's push for privatization and free-market investment, the plight of the nation's poor did not lessen as the IMF and World Bank promised. Rather the income gap widened, as high-profit but low-wage industries came to dominate the economy.²⁵ Wohlford explains that the rhetoric used by the MST, the CPT, and liberation theologians had to be adapted in the age of democracy. These leaders had to show that even in the age of "economic freedom," the forces of free-market capitalism were still privileging the elite landowners and promoting a voracious destruction of resources and an abuse of laborers. In her brilliant analysis, Wohlford shows that the progressive church leaders and land reform activists willfully pitched a battle with the large-scale landowners and corporate representatives about what a "moral economy" should look like in Brazil.

²³ Wendy Wolford, "Producing Community: The MST and Land Reform Settlements in Brazil," *Journal of Agrarian Change*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (October 2003), pp. 500-520.

²⁴ Miguel Carter, "The landless rural workers movement (MST) and democracy in Brazil," (Working Paper) *Oxford Centre for Brazilian Studies*, (Oxford: 2000), 7.

²⁵ Wendy Wolford, "Agrarian moral economies and neoliberalism in Brazil: competing worldviews and the state in the struggle for land" *Environment and Planning*, Vol. 37 (2005), 241.

Large-scale ranchers, mining company representatives, and other established landowners bemoaned the squatting and protests of the MST, stating that by the rational laws of economics – the laws of supply and demand and the forces of competition, capital investment and innovation – they had an inalienable right to the land. On the other side of the debate, land reform activists stated that “land [was] for those who work it.” Their moral economy “emphasized the centrality of land, community, and the local,” states Wohlford. As she continues, land was believed to be key both to “production and to social reproduction, where farmers who produced for their families were the proper stewards of the material environment.” One MST activist said, simply: “Land is life.”²⁶

Wohlford remarks that the MST’s moral economy resounds with the same righteousness of the agrarian elite’s, “though derived from a source they considered more authoritative than the marketplace – God.”²⁷ She quotes one settlement farmer who proclaimed, “God didn’t sell the land to anyone, he left it for us. In the time of my parents, land was not sold, you just went there. Land means a lot – that’s where your life is. I was born on the land ... [and] all I know how to do is work on the land. On the land you don’t go hungry.”²⁸

The importance of the landless movement in relation to the church’s stance on the environment is that over the history of the movement, the church leaders of the MST and the CPT began to recognize that ecological sustainability was at the heart of a small-farming society. They realized that it was one of the biggest justifications for the movement. Even though studies have shown that small, organic farms are often more

²⁶ Ibid., 248.

²⁷ Ibid., 248.

²⁸ Ibid., 249.

productive per acre over a longer period of time than large farms, because of the corporate structure of food distribution and international food trade already entrenched in Brazilian commerce, large agribusiness firms currently have the upper hand with macroeconomic arguments in political lobbying. However, in terms of environmental and social sustainability, the small farmers can easily assert why land reform is vital for Brazil's long-term national health.²⁹

As Wolford and Wright outline, agroecology and organic methods attractive to MST members for many reasons. These methods help farmers avoid being tied to fluctuating international markets for commodity crops and allow them to be more self-sufficient. Small farmers can avoid the middleman who takes most of the profit and can sell directly to local consumers. Also, such practices are more sustainable in the long term for a plot of land. Industrial methods of heavy irrigation and synthetic pesticides and fertilizers degrade the fragile rainforest soils. Large corporate farms can afford to exhaust and move on, but small farmers have to tend their land.³⁰

As James K. Boyce, Peter Rosset, & Elizabeth A. Stanton state in their study on the environmental sustainability of land reform movements, "Across the globe, small-scale farmers consistently tend to grow more output per acre than large farms. At the same time, when small family farmers hold secure land rights, they tend to be better environmental stewards, protecting and enhancing soil fertility, water quality, and biodiversity."³¹ Boyce, et al. continue, asserting, "The shift to environmental-friendly farming practices has been slow, but with experience and education, new 'agro-

²⁹ Gabriel A. Ondetti, *Land, Protest, and Politics: the Landless Movement and the Struggle for Agrarian Reform in Brazil* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 237.

³⁰ Wright and Wolford, 294.

³¹ James K. Boyce, Peter Rosset, & Elizabeth A. Stanton, "Land Reform and Sustainable Development," in James K. Boyce, Sunita Narain, and Elizabeth A. Stanton, eds., *Reclaiming Nature: Environmental Justice and Ecological Restoration* (London: Anthem Press, 2006), 1.

ecological' practices are gaining ground in the MST settlements."³² These include "tree replanting, the use of crop rotations and manures to build soil fertility, and organic farming with some of the produce fetching a price premium in urban markets."³³

To counteract the abuse of corporate seed companies like Monsanto that hamper sustainable agricultural practices and farmer autonomy, the MST has set up an organic seed company, called Bionatur, that sells to settlements around the country.³⁴ Boyce, et al. argue that in general, these small farmers of Brazil are more likely to preserve crop diversity and allow for natural habitat, as Church leaders have facilitated much of this environmental education, in addition to mobilizing the farmers to participate in global movements for non-corporate, sustainable, family-based agriculture such as Via Campesina, which works to protect farmers from the ill-effects of free trade agricultural policies and corporate control of commodity crops.³⁵

Over the past few decades, the Vatican has pulled back from liberation theology and land reform, and has instated many bishops who are opposed to the movement that many view as too Marxist. However, this has not hampered the efforts CPT or MST; in fact land reform efforts have surged since 2002 and church leaders are still very active in the campaign.³⁶ Bishop Tomás Balduino, president of the Brazilian bishops' commission on lands, was asked about the Vatican's chilly treatment of groups like the Landless Workers' Movement. "[N]ot absolutely everything depends on the hierarchy," the bishop said. "There is something that impels us forward, the Spirit of God who blows where it wills. There is a living force, not only inside the church but throughout the whole world,

³² Ibid., 6.

³³ Ibid., 6.

³⁴ Ibid., 6.

³⁵ Boyce, et al.,

³⁶ Ondetti, 221.

which is on a liberation journey. The journey of women, of ecology, of the Earth. We sense that with or without the church, this journey will move forward."³⁷

IV. Considering the Amazon

There is no better case study of how the church has navigated land use and ecology than land reform in the Amazon region. Quite forcefully, Leonardo Boff claims, "If we want to see the brutal face of the capitalist and industrial system, we need only visit the Brazilian Amazon. That is where all the capital sins (mortal sin and sins of capital) are committed."³⁸ As geographer Cynthia S. Simmons states, "The Brazilian Amazon is an area of both serious environmental degradation and social instability. Large tracts of forest have been removed in the wake of economic development, and current estimates of deforestation range between 10,000 and 20,000 km² annually."³⁹ As Wright and Wolford observe, those in favor of development of the Amazon see potential for tropical timber; abundant iron ore, bauxite and many other minerals; hydroelectric power; and large-scale agricultural possibilities. In contrast, those in favor of forest protection cite species protection, climate change needs, and problems of fragmentation and ecosystem disruption as reasons to halt industrial development.

The Amazon River contains one-half to two-thirds of all the fresh water on the planet (outside of the frozen polar regions). An increasing amount of this river water is polluted with arsenic and other extremely toxic substances from mining and industry. Additionally, the extreme loss of habitat is pushing indigenous peoples off the land as quickly as it is exterminating non-human organisms.⁴⁰ As the authors recount, though

³⁷ Coode, 1.

³⁸ Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 86.

³⁹ Cynthia S. Simmons, et al., "The changing dynamics of land conflict in the Brazilian Amazon: The rural-urban complex and its environmental implications," *Urban Ecosystems*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2002), p. 99.

⁴⁰ Wright and Wolford, 186.

many Brazilian elites like to blame deforestation on small farmers and MST squatters, the vast majority of habitat destruction is caused by lumber, mining, and agrobusiness companies.

Simmons explains that some economists argue that as urbanization increases in the Amazon, environmental degradation should decrease, as there will be less demand for farmland. However, the Amazon is urbanizing faster than any other area of Brazil, yet “rates of deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon increased rapidly alongside of frontier urbanization.”⁴¹ Despite the vast amount of area in the Amazon, large companies have concentrated ownership of the land and controlled transportation routes so that small-scale farming is almost impossible. People are forced to move into the cities to work in low-wage jobs and contribute to industries that are much more aggressive to the forest than any small-farming communities would be, Simmons argues.⁴²

The CPT and MST have always objected to any type of frontier movement to the Amazon, despite the government’s push to settle the forest for territorial and economic reasons. Wright and Wolford explain that church leaders who had fought for the rights of settlers in the Amazon were aware that the soils the Amazon were very difficult (as they are full of aluminum, very nutrient poor, and prone to erosion), the ecological damage would be inevitable, and that the social forces were even more imposing than in the South, where the soil was good and land was still available if the government cooperated. However, by the 1970s when the church became involved in land reform, many peasants had already migrated to the Amazon, dreaming of fertile, free land. Their

⁴¹ Simmons, 107.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 100-105.

isolation and lack of real access to viable land led to these migrants to quickly become destitute. Wolford and Wright remark that a common strategy of the lumber companies was to sell a farmer a bit of land, pay him a decent sum to clear it, and promise to clear the road to the farm. However, the company would then abandon the farmer and leave the road to deteriorate, cutting off his access to markets to sell his crop and without any community support to teach him how to work the very difficult soils. The authors argue that the only way to survive as a farmer in the Amazon is to focus on subsistence (as commodity crops and cattle quickly degrade the soils even with petrochemical fertilizers) and to be based in a strong community that can aid you with transportation, health care, education, etc.⁴³

The CPT was formed in 1975 in direct response to the plight of the Amazon settlers and to provide just these services. As stated previously, it then spread to help landless people throughout Brazil, but it has remained particularly strong in the Amazon. Some researchers such as Hewitt have suggested that the CPT and CEBs have lost their influence, citing studies in urban areas like Sao Paulo.⁴⁴ But as political theorist Madeleine Adriance argues, "As for the rural CEBs, they may be compared to a tiger that has been released from its cage and will not be called back simply because the trainer has changed his mind."⁴⁵ Although some of the bishops have ceased to encourage their formation, "base communities in the Amazon region continue to meet and support their members' land struggles because these members see this type of organization as crucial to their own survival."⁴⁶ Unlike in urban environments where there are multiple secular organizations to support the poor, in rural Brazil (and

⁴³ Wright and Wolford, 200-206.

⁴⁴ Hewitt, 244.

⁴⁵ Adriance, "The Brazilian Catholic Church and the Struggle for Land in the Amazon," 381.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 381.

particular the Northern regions), “because of the small number of other organizations mobilizing peasant farmers, the influence of church groups is strong.”

For this reason, “along with the relative autonomy of rural CEBs mentioned above, the Amazon region offers clearly observable cases of the function of religion in relation to social change,” Adriance concludes.⁴⁷ In 10 out of the 15 parishes she interviewed in her study of MST activity in the Amazon, interviewees stated that *all* MST activists were members of CEBs.⁴⁸ Adriance also comments that the activists’ faith supported them through the pervasive violence of the land reform; the Amazon is the most violent part of the landless movement, with hundreds of murders by military police and hired assassins.⁴⁹ She quotes one farmer, who stated, “When they killed Father Josimo [for his work with the landless] I felt almost lost in despair. But at the same time I had faith in the Gospel, and saw that we had to pass through the persecutions that we were suffering.”⁵⁰

As political scientist, Margaret E. Keck, cites, the Amazon was the first place that the church and the landless movement became famous for promoting environmental justice. As she chronicles, “In the late 1980s the Acre rubber tappers’ movement and its leader Francisco (Chico) Mendes won international acclaim for their struggle to preserve traditional livelihoods against the encroachment of the ranchers who threatened to turn tropical forest into pasture.”⁵¹ Aided by the Catholic Church (and in particular liberation theology bishop Dom Moacir, the first leader of the CPT), Chico Mendes and his rubber tapper movement attempted to reclaim land that had been theirs for generations.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 381.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 378.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 378.

⁵⁰ Adriance, “The Brazilian Catholic Church and the Struggle for Land in the Amazon,” 379.

⁵¹ Margaret E. Keck, “Social Equity and Environmental Politics in Brazil: Lessons from the Rubber Tappers of Acre,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Jul., 1995), 410.

The rubber tappers had lived sustainably in the deep Amazon, originally immigrating to the area in the late 19th century during the rubber boom. After the boom ended, they formed small communities along the river, where they practiced ecological subsistence farming using innovative techniques they learned from the indigenous residents who have been successfully cultivating in the Amazon for centuries. When they were violently driven off the land by ranchers, they put up a fight, which caught the attention of international environmental NGOs like Friends of the Earth and the Environmental Defense Fund. As global concern about the fate of the Amazon rose, these NGOs became particularly interested in the rhetoric of Chico Mendes, who advocated protection of the forest through resource use that complemented the ecological processes of the rain forest ecosystems, rather a use that ruined habitats. He demonstrated how his community of rubber tappers, as well as the local indigenous population, valued the well-being of the forest not only for aesthetic reasons, but because its ecological processes were vital for their lifestyle, which included food gathering, fishing, small-scale cultivation, and sustainable rubber harvesting.

As Keck argues, "The story [of Chico Mendes and the rubber tappers] was powerful because it created an identity, and not merely a linkage, between a particular, localized struggle for social justice and global environmental goals."⁵² When he was murdered by the ranchers, Mendes became globally renowned an ecological martyr. He will go down in history as one of the first proponents of environmental justice (the interconnection between human and ecological health).

Decades later, the Amazon is still embroiled in ecological and social conflict. As climate change looms over the global community, more pressure is put on Brazil to

⁵² Ibid., 411.

protect its forests, as the Amazon is one of the largest carbon sinks on the planet and essential for climate stability. However, simultaneously, the neoliberal agenda of the IMF and the World Bank continues to pressure Brazil to develop its immense mineral and agricultural resources in order to join the ranks of the first world. Recently, Brazil has risen to the sixth largest economy, mainly due to this privatized investment in resource extraction and corporate agriculture. Meanwhile, land conflicts continue to escalate in the forest, with sustained church involvement, and ecological rhetoric has become even more explicit.

Several massacres of landless occupants have occurred, including the famous of the 1996 El Dorado de Carajas massacre, when 19 people were killed by the Pará state military police.⁵³ Additionally, many priests, nuns, and priests have been murdered for their work with the landless, including an American nun named Sister Dorothy Stang. Born in Ohio in 1931, Stang was a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Brazil; she had lived with the landless in the state of Pará and was very outspoken on behalf of the poor farmers and the environment. Her particular passion was helping the MST settlers make a living by farming small plots of land using indigenous methods of organic matter composting, crop rotation, integrated pest management utilizing native plants and animals, and letting plots lie fallow. She also taught farmers how to extract forest products without deforestation. A brave defender of the landless against the military police and the criminal gangs in the area, Stang was often pictured wearing a T-shirt that said "*A Morte da floresta é o fim da nossa vida*," which is Portuguese for "The death of the forest is the end of our life." She was murdered in 2005, by thugs hired by Rayfran das Neves Sales, a large landowner whom Stang had

⁵³ Wright and Wolford, 206.

reported to the authorities for illegally setting fires to reserved land to clear it for ranching.⁵⁴

V. The Damming of Brazil

Reviewing the Brazilian Catholic church's role in land reform is essential for understanding why the church's social activism adopted ecological goals. However, to fully address the research question of how it has reacted to neoliberal development, it is necessary to examine how the church has participated in other movements involving large development projects. While mining is of most interest to me given my experience in Brazil, there is sadly very little literature on the church's involvement in anti-mining campaigns, despite the fact that I know from my dialogue with local priests that such activism is present in many areas of Brazil. However, there is a wealth of literature on the large hydroelectric dam projects in Brazil, as they glean more attention in international arenas due to their massive scale.

As political scientist Franklin D. Rothman describes, the anti-dam movement began in 1979 in southern Brazil as a local mobilization by church land reform networks to aid peasants affected by the proposed flooding of river valleys by large hydroelectric dams. He cites that "CPT activists and their allies framed the dam struggle in the context of liberation theology, the linking of faith and life, and the linking of faith and politics."⁵⁵ Initially the movement organization was known as CRAB (*Comissão Regional de Atingidos por Barragens*, Regional Committee of Those Displaced by Dams) and was connected to the CPT. One dam project in particular, the ELETROSUL dam, required much church participation. As Rothman recounts,

⁵⁴ Le Breton, Binka, *The Greatest Gift: The Courageous Life and Martyrdom of Sister Dorothy Stang*, (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 78-89, 110.

⁵⁵Franklin D. Rothman, "From local to global: The anti-dam movement in southern Brazil, 1979-1992". *Mobilization: An International Journal*, Vol. 4 No. 1 (1999), 41.

Links with external communication networks were essential for obtaining and distributing the necessary information about construction plans and resettlement options. Pastoral agents obtained information about government plans, determined which areas would be affected, and obtained testimony from other regions about government compensation and resettlement programs. The Bishop of Chapecó, Santa Catarina, Dom José Gomes, obtained crucial information through the National Conference of Bishops and placed human and material resources of the Church at the disposal of the incipient movement. Several early movement leaders were former Catholic priests or seminarians.⁵⁶

As Rothman explains, the framing of the anti-dam movement clearly shifted over time in southern Brazil: “Initially understood as a struggle about peasants’ right to land and livelihood, the anti-dam movement evolved into a land struggle that was also about the destruction of natural habitat through misguided industrialization and agricultural policies.”⁵⁷

This shift occurred in the late 1980s with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the temporary weakening of the land reform movement, when church leaders realized that the traditional Marxist rhetoric of liberation theology needed updating. Inspired by Chico Mendes and his movement, they started to collaborate with international environmental NGOs involved in anti-dam movements in other parts of Brazil.⁵⁸ These new allies helped reinforce the new ecological imperatives of Boff and other theological leaders, but the new synthesis of ecology and theology required time and hardwork, Rothman explains:

Several years of discussions were necessary, and the new ideology was a synthesis that held to the core values and imperatives of the old class-

⁵⁶ Ibid., 48-49.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 44.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 50.

and Bible-based defense of land while encompassing the new ecology-based defense of land. This new ideology, in turn, influenced the international actors in contact with local activists and became the basis for new networks and alliance structures.⁵⁹

Though there are countless examples of anti-dam movements involving church activism, in all regions of Brazil, I will highlight two that show the nuance of the economic development context of the dam projects as well as the church's flexibility and innovative support of those affected by the dams.

One case study is the Porto Estrela dam project in Minas Gerais, in what is known as the *Zona da Mata* (the same forest region I lived in during the summer of 2011). Though the dam project had comparatively small social effects, displacing only 32 families and flooding 4.2 square kilometers, its ecological consequences in the fragile hydrological system of the Atlantic Forest were significant. The project was sponsored by the Fiat Company, who wanted the dam to supply all the energy for its new plant in the area.⁶⁰ The Catholic Church's CPT was active in the opposition movement from the beginning of the project proposal in 1993, assisting the community members by gaining as much detailed information as possible from the state (a process which is often difficult in Brazil, a country with a dire lack of bureaucratic transparency about development projects). The CPT also held a series of meetings with community members and reached out to the dam developers to negotiate.⁶¹ The project was put on hold due to the resistance, but then reinstated in 1999 by a larger power company.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 55.

⁶⁰ Rothman, "A Comparative Study of Dam-Resistance Campaigns and Environmental Policy in Brazil," *The Journal of Environment Development*, Vol. 10 (2001), 324.

⁶¹ Rothman, "A Comparative Study of Dam-Resistance Campaigns and Environmental Policy in Brazil," 327-328.

As Rothman explains, the Catholic Church intensified assistance to the community: "A female church activist, with support from her male colleague, conducted a series of community meetings, following which the local committee of dam-affected people initiated negotiations with the power company."⁶² During these meetings, the female church activist emphasized the long-term ecological consequences for the local farmers and the entire region who depended on reliable water sources for their agriculture. Though the movement was not entirely successful and the project was continued, the CPT did manage to negotiate an agreement with the power company in late 1999.⁶³

The second case study, the Belo Monte Dam project, comes from G. O. Carvalho's scholarly article on environmental resistance to energy development in the Amazon.⁶⁴ When Carvalho wrote the article in 2006, the dam project was already exceedingly controversial, as the scale of the project would affect a large section of untouched Amazon forest and displace over 12 indigenous tribes who had previously had little contact with modern Brazilians. Originally proposed in 1975 by the Brazilian power company, Eletronorte, and sponsored by the World Bank, the project proposed three huge dams on the Xingu River to provide power to all the new, blossoming industries in the Amazon.⁶⁵ As Carvalho describes, in 1989, the indigenous peoples in the Xingu, aided by environmental NGOs, the CPT, and the Brazilian Catholic Church's Commission for Indigenous Rights, "organized a meeting that brought more than 1,000 participants to Altamira, including 600 indigenous people, Brazilian government

⁶² Ibid., 328.

⁶³ Ibid., 328.

⁶⁴ G. O. Carvalho, "Environmental Resistance and the Politics of Energy Development in the Brazilian Amazon". *The Journal of Environment & Development*, Vol. 15, No. 3, (Sept., 2006), 247.

⁶⁵ Carvalho, 247.

officials, foreign journalists, celebrities, and NGO representatives.”⁶⁶ Now considered an iconic moment in the campaign, a Kayapó woman threatened the Eletronorte representative with a machete.

As Carvohlo says, “The mobilization generated international pressure and led to condemnation of the extensive flooding of a sensitive tropical ecosystem and indigenous lands that damming the Xingu, a high-volume river with great seasonal variability, would cause.”⁶⁷ Under pressure to improve its environmental image, the World Bank withdrew its support. However, a few years later, the project was proposed again without World Bank funding, using international and domestic capital investment instead. Besides Eletronorte and Eletrobrás, state-controlled utilities, and the Brazilian Ministry of Mines and Energy (MME), a number of these companies have formed a consortium, Consórcio Brasil, to fund and lobby for the project, including two heavy construction companies, Andrade Gutierrez and Camargo Correa; multinational equipment and electronic component manufacturers such as Alstom, ABB, General Electric, and Voith Siemens; and several aluminum companies including Alcoa/Albrás.⁶⁸

The project is currently scheduled to break ground and has become an international controversy. In President Obama’s meeting with the President Dilma Rousseff, both American and Brazilian protestors demanded that the leaders halt the project, citing that grave costs of such intrusive energy infrastructure greatly outweigh any potential economic benefit.⁶⁹ The current plans for Belo Monte Dam consist of a

⁶⁶ Ibid., 258.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 258.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 259.

⁶⁹ Jim Lobe, “Brazil, U.S. Deepen Ties Ahead of Obama’s Latin America Week,” *Inter Press Service News Agency*, April 10, 2012, accessed April 20, 2012, <<http://www.internationalpolicydigest.org/>>, 1.

group of 3 huge dams, numerous dykes, and canals to supply two power stations on the Xingu River.

The dams will divert more than 80% of the flow of the Xingu River; it will cause a permanent drought on the river's large bend and will flood a total of 668 km² of which 400 km² is standing forest. The flooding will displace much more than the 20,000 that Brazil's government admits will lose their land, including Juruna, Xikrin, Arara, Kuruaya and Kayapo indigenous communities. Scientists predict that it will permanently destroy much of the Amazon's biodiversity. Additionally, the radical disturbance of the ecosystem presents a high level of health risk from insect-borne diseases such as malaria. Brazilian religious leaders have continued to vehemently fight against the dam, stating that not only is it a cruel injustice to the indigenous community and ecosystems, but that it will also continue to perpetuate unsustainable development in the Amazon that will perpetuate more unstable ecological and social land conflict.⁷⁰

VI. Mining Brazil's Riches

As I stated above, there is very little literature on the Catholic Church's response to mining in Brazil. However, as I feel that it is an important part of neoliberal development in Brazil, I will briefly outline my own findings on the subject.

In the Serra do Brigadeiro Territory, one of the most influential sources of identity and values are the local Catholic base communities, which are run by a group of ecologically-minded Franciscan monks who travel around the country to 30 churches in the diocese to hold masses, lead religious festivals, and speak to their church members about social, political, and environmental issues. Descended from a long tradition of

⁷⁰ Carvahlo, 260-261.

liberation theology, the Catholic church leaders are decidedly anti-mining. As the head priest, Frei Gilberto, explains:

You have to understand, in the Franciscan vision, everything is created by God, and everything is created equally. We have a relationship with everything. ... The reason I'm against mining is because it is aggressive to the world. It is attacking the whole system. When I'm attacking Mother Nature, I'm attacking all of her children. ... When we talk about mining, my view is that we need to preserve the earth. But also, we need to preserve economic integrity for the people who live on the earth, and the quality of life here, etc. [Mining] affects the whole ecosystem, and it tends to have the greatest effect on the simpler people. There is a Franciscan [mission statement]= Justice, Peace, and Ecology, also known as the Integration of Creation. We actually have representation at the UN. We set up groups [with this mission] all over the world. There is one that is very active against the mining in Belo Horizonte.

Although they are not as overtly political as their predecessors were in the region during the military dictatorship, and certainly not as militant (quite the opposite, in fact), the Franciscans play a pivotal role in the discourse on mining. In late July, the diocese hosted a *romaria*, a procession with several hundred people through the town of Belasario. The theme of the *romaria* was "Preserving Nature and Life: Creation Cries Out For Help." The event had six small stations, each with short masses. At one stop, the crowd asked God for forgiveness of environmental sins, including mining, deforestation, and fertilizer and pesticide use. At other stops, they celebrated the rural workers, family agriculture, and the rights of women and children.

Because of my fascination with the monks and their mission, I paid special attention in my interviews to how their stance on the mining affected the views of their parishioners. Some church members, like Juliana, explicitly stated the connection:

Frei Gilberto fell like a present from heaven, because he actually has the power of speaking. ... (D)uring the mass...he talks about the environment, he talks about the mining. He's good at explaining things to people, at inspiring them. He's very good.

Others, like Miriam (the woman quoted in the beginning of this paper), did not mention whether the church leaders influenced their thoughts on the mining, but did use their religious conviction to support their opinions.

Tellingly, one older farmer named Sebastian used religion to justify the credibility of his warning to the younger generation about the perils of mining:

But they don't listen to me. They think I'm stupid. As the Bible says, many things are not revealed to the smart. They're revealed to the humble. There are many things that you can't pass on. 'Ah,' they say, 'He's just a silly old fool.'

His faith allows him to believe that, even as 'lowly farmer,' he has the authority to stand up to the more powerful pro-mining voices in the community.

Separate from the Franciscan order, but still an integral part of the Catholic society in the area, the CPT has been active in the mining since the community first learned of the bauxite concessions. Historically, because small-scale agriculture is already well established in the Serra do Brigadeiro Territory, the local CPT is mostly involved in rural workers' rights and the protection of family agriculture (rather than landless advocacy). Carlos commented:

... There is the Land Pastoral. ... It looks after ... people in the countryside. ... When one of the [mining] dams burst [in 2006 in Muriaé], and it affected people not only in the countryside but also in the city, it was the Land Pastoral that was helping people out. ... In this moment, I see the Catholic Church as the one that really went to bat for the rural workers. The Protestant churches did not.

As Carlos mentions, there exists a wave of evangelical, Protestant churches in the area that are not vocally opposed to mining. More focused on a doctrine of salvation than political action, or a “theology of prosperity” as Frei Gilberto calls it, they are more conservative and are in favor of capitalism. Cleber, a member of the local Methodist church, told me while he was interested in making the Methodist domination more socially active, he did not believe an anti-mining stance was necessarily in society’s best interest.⁷¹

During my research project, it was not an easy task to weave these many themes and opinions together to answer my research question with one concise thesis about how the mining discourse has influenced identity in the territory writ large. For mining has brought a myriad of issues to the table. And it has highlighted the differing opinions *within* the community stakeholders. However, in my reflections on my data, six main themes emerged:

1) The mining has accelerated dialogue on the future of family agriculture in the region as Brazil (and the Serra do Brigadeiro territory with it) becomes more engaged in a capitalist model. For some, this instills fear of an unknown destiny and grief over a changing culture, while for others this incentivizes a pragmatic outlook on mining and

⁷¹ Connor, 42-44.

industrialism as the economic drivers of the future. Others seize the chance to fight to save family agriculture and make it compatible in a modern Brazilian economy.

2) The threat of mining on natural entities like forests and water has enabled people to articulate why these resources are important to their livelihoods and why they must be protected. Moreover, because an external force is threatening these ecological forces, it propels many members of the community to take pride and ownership in them.

3) As people work to articulate why they do or do not value family agriculture and the natural environment in light of the mining, religion is identified as a key way of expressing these opinions. For those against the mining, the Catholic Church is an organizational tool for expressing opinions as a group. And the language of Christianity is used to convey emotion about the mining and place it in a larger, philosophical framework. For those who support the mining, different Christian theologies are used to justify the acceptance of economic forces like mining.

4) The mining, and the swift economic change that it represents, unearths insecurities about cultural change in the community, particularly in terms of the shift from the older to younger generations. Some members of the older generation see the younger people as not valuing the land as much as they should and unwisely fleeing to “the city,” a metaphorical place imbued with symbolism of both danger and opportunity. The younger generation seems to be of mixed opinion, disliking the practical ramifications of mining, but compelled by the type of development (and lifestyle) it represents.

5) The mining demonstrates to the people of the territory that, while the outside world may seem far away in the cozy valleys of the mountains, globalization already has a strong presence in these communities. Many see this globalization as positive, as a

source of information and progress, while others see it as a hostile force that is threatening their way of life. Some see both sides.

6) After eight years of grappling with the issue, many stakeholders state a need for a different type of language in resisting and/or negotiation with external forces like mining. Regardless of their opinion on the value of mining, stakeholders seem to think that the current, polarized approach to the mining (bitter resistance versus blind acceptance) is ineffectual in the long term. Many speak of a need to learn how to articulate their vision of ideal development in a way that effects positive change and cooperation.⁷²

VII. Analyzing Brazilian Catholic Public Opinion on Ecology in Brazil

In summary, through our review of land reform and anti-dam and anti-mining movements, we have utilized Opschoor's guidelines to examine how the church has constructed social values about Christianity and environmentalism; how they have acted to critique the powers of economic elites in order to defend the rights of marginalized peoples and habitats; and how they have tried to help their parishioners cope with the changes of globalization. However, I believe that a complete analysis necessitates reference to how effective this religious activism is received among Catholic communities in Brazil. In order to do this, I cross-tabulated data from the World Values Surveys taken in Brazil from 2005-2008, in order to glean a sense of how supportive Catholic communities are of ecological preservation in comparison to the national average. The survey question I examined was, "Should society prioritize environmental protection or economic growth?"

⁷² Connor, 56-58.

First, I did a cross-comparative analysis of Catholics United States and Brazil. The data showed that Brazilian Catholics favor environmental protection by a greater margin than American Catholics. In Brazil, 65% of Catholics stated they think society should prioritize protecting the environment over economic growth (compared to the 64.2% national average in favor of environmental protection in Brazil). Conversely, 30% of Brazilian Catholics favored economic growth (in comparison to the 30.7% national average in favor of economic growth).

In the United States, only 54.2% of Catholics favored environmental protection (in comparison to the 52.5% national average) while 45.8% of American Catholics favored economic growth (compared to the 47.5% national average).⁷³ Catholicism positively influenced Catholics in both countries in terms of ecological support. While it is true that Brazilian Catholics are more strongly in favor of environmental protection, one cannot imply direct causation from the Brazilian ecotheologies, as the national average is also higher than the American national average, and other factors could be influencing the entire country. However, it is probable that the church has an ecological influence on the country's ideologies.

Secondly, using the same environmental question, I analyzed how Catholics in Brazil of various occupations responded to the question. I hypothesized that the grassroots work by the CEBs, the MST, and the CPT would influence rural farmers more than urban workers. Accordingly, of the 13 occupations surveyed (Employer/manager of establishment with 10 or more employed; Employer/manager of establishment with less than 10 employed; Professional worker; Supervisory/ Non-manual office worker;

⁷³ "Brazil and United States: Econ Growth vs. Environmental Protection: Religion," *World Values Survey, 2005-2008*, accessed April 10, 2012, <<http://www.wvsevsdb.com/>>.

Non manual -office worker; Foreman and supervisor; Skilled manual; Semi-skilled manual worker; Unskilled manual; Farmer: has own farm; Agricultural worker; Member of armed forces; Never had a job), the “Farmer: has own farm” category was overwhelmingly the most in favor of environmental protection over economic growth, with 82.3% in favor of environmental protection (in comparison with 65% Catholic average) and only 5.4% in favor of economic growth (in comparison with the 30% Catholic average). Not surprisingly, the urbanized jobs favored economic growth the most; the “Supervisory/ Non-manual office worker” favored environmental protection the least, with 56.2% in favor of environmental protection and 43.8% in favor of economic growth.⁷⁴ Again, direct causation is impossible to prove, but I would hypothesize that Catholic activism over the past few decades has affected Brazil’s rural farmers opinions of the importance of healthy ecosystems and sustainable development.

VIII. Conclusion: Neoliberalism and the Future of Brazilian Ecotheological Activism

It is a confirming sign that even in recent news, the Brazilian Catholic Church has been actively lobbying against anti-environmental legislation. A proposal for a new “Forest Code” is currently being debated in Brazil’s national government, which would rewrite some of the rules regarding protected areas, grant amnesty to illegal deforestation that occurred before July 2008, and give states greater control over preservation management. According to a journalistic report, opponents say that “easing deforestation laws will give a green-light to developers and loggers to fell more of the Amazon Rainforest.”⁷⁵ Brazil’s Catholic Church announced that it would count on

⁷⁴ “Brazil: Econ Growth vs. Environmental Protection: Religion and Occupation,” *World Values Survey*, 2005-2008, accessed April 10, 2012, <<http://www.wvsevsdb.com/>>.

⁷⁵ “Brazil Catholic Church opposes proposed reforms to rainforest laws,” *CNN World*, June 18, 2011, accessed Mar 1, 2011, <http://articles.cnn.com/2011-06-18/world/brazil.forest.law_1_reforms-laws-petition?_s=PM:WORLD>, 1.

its 12,000 parishes to circulate a petition against the reforms, the state-run *Agencia Brasil* news agency reported. "Our main concern is the impact and consequences of a law of this size on people's lives and the environment," the church said in a statement. "We urge our communities to participate in the process of reform of the Forest Code, mobilizing social forces and promoting a petition against the devastation," the statement said." Last year, the church was able to collect more than 1 million signatures on a petition regarding another piece of legislation, *Agencia Brasil* reported. The church said its goal with the Forest Code petition is to foment public discussion on the proposed bill.⁷⁶ Such rhetoric speaks volumes about how much even the institutionalized church in Brazil has integrated the goals of ecology and social wellbeing.

In this paper, I examined the ecological activism of the Catholic Church in Brazil since the advent of liberation theology, attempting to prove that such environmental aims were a *purposeful* and *natural* extension of the Church's mission for the country. I focused solely on the Catholic Church, not to discount to work of Protestants and Evangelicals and non-Christian religions, but to maintain focus on one unified (or at least distinct) group of Christians. While I feel confident that I have provided some persuasive evidence to support my thesis, the fact that this research question is such a new one means that the academic community has not yet reached a strong consensus on the subject. Scholars need to do much more statistical, ethnographic, and theological research until we can say anything definitive about such religious activism.

Nevertheless, progressive activism by Christian communities is certainly not unprecedented. From Jesus and his disciples, to early Christian communities in Rome, to American slavery abolitionists, to European Christian Democratic movements, Christian

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

voices have spoken up in the name of justice and protested established political orders to demand adherence to higher ideals. As political theorist Jos J.A.M. Van Gennip states, Christian communities have the potential to be one of the strongest forces in answering the far-reaching questions about the orientation of our globalized, capitalist society and about the future of Creation:

[Relying on only] pragmatism leads to shortsightedness that just relies on the ongoing trends to the right of the strongest in all domains. [Many] elements of [Christian ethics] are relevant to facing the challenges of globalization: the values of justice, solidarity, stewardship, and subsidiarity; the concepts of the common good, the community-oriented and responsible human person; the meaning of civil society – which stands at the same time apart from the state, works together with the state, and position itself against the state – and the need for shared orientations. Finding new balances between the local and the global – such a high priority for so many citizens – between society and individuality, between tradition and renewal, between justice and vested interests, and between idealism and realism, is also of paramount importance and urgency.⁷⁷

As Van Gennip continues, the biggest mistake that postmodern theorists made was to assume that the world was entering a phase where “there would be less and less need for Great Narratives, ideological orientations, and value-centred policies.” As he argues, “If one thing has become clear, it is that humankind faces an inevitable choice between a world order based on law and justice and a disorder based on the law of the jungle and plain chaos.”⁷⁸ He states that religion can greatly aid us in making this choice.

⁷⁷ Jos J.A.M. Van Gennip, “International Cooperation and the Christian Social Tradition” in Goldewijk, 302-303.

⁷⁸ Van Gennip, 301.

Only time will tell how the Catholic Church continues to evolve in its ecological activism. Will the increasing challenges of economic development in Brazil continue to incite the Church into ecological action? Or, as Frei Gilberto (the priest I interviewed in Brazil) fears, will the economic culture of the United States and the rest of the first world continue to influence Brazilian Christianity (as it already has) and promote a less worldly, more conservative Christian culture that promotes capitalist development? As a whole, the global Christian community seems to be polarized on the issue at the moment. On one hand, groups like the World Council of Churches are promoting policies like the Accra Declaration and the AGAPE Declaration, calling for non-neoliberal, holistic development, and condemning imperial and greedy behavior of developed nations.⁷⁹ But on the other, the Vatican takes no strong action against capitalist principles, and figures like Rick Santorum and other conservative and Evangelical American leaders openly praise such principles as God-given commandments.

A growing movement of environmentalists, religious followers, and members of many other ideological communities, is beginning to articulate why the current global economic order is pragmatically unsustainable and spiritually flawed. While I fully acknowledge that I participate in the system I critique, I must profess that I believe our global society has drifted to a reality in which we do not worship God but our possessions. We do not celebrate human and non-human relationality, but only these organisms' utility. And we hubristically assume we can exhaust the biosphere and simply replace it with our technological inventions.

In Leonardo Boff's estimation,

⁷⁹ Opschoor, 271.

We are not allowed to destroy what we have not created. In the future we must espouse not only a type of development that reduces ecological damage to a minimum, but one that will be consonant with the resources of the natural environment (as Chico Mendes said of mining).⁸⁰

As he questions, "Can we make India, China, or Latin America into what Germany or Italy are today? The models of society and development that prevail nowadays cannot be universalized." He argues, "This means that profound worldwide changes are needed, embracing a new economic order, a new concept of ownership, and different social and ecological relationships—in short, a new humanity."⁸¹ As Carlos, a young, brilliant farmer that I met in the Serra do Brigadeiro, observed:

We damage the earth, even as farmers. But she still looks after us. We make mistakes and she still gives us another chance. "The earth is crying out in pains of childbirth."⁸² But after she gives birth, there is something beautiful.

⁸⁰ Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, 89.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁸² An allusion to the Romaria theme and to Romans 8:22: "For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together..."

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