The Catholic Church played no part in the Cuban Revolution, which totally marginalized religion and turned churches into public auditoriums. Historically, the Catholic Church had been, above all, a powerful bulwark of the status quo and therefore a prime target of revolutionaries. But churchmen could be revolutionaries, too. Father Miguel Hidalgo and Father José María Morelos had shown that during Mexico’s independence struggle. Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, the early advocate for indigenous people, had led the way in the 1500s.

In the 1960s, Latin America’s radical priests again followed the lead of las Casas. Father Camilo Torres was one. A son of the Colombian upper class, Torres taught Latin America’s most “subversive”
academic discipline, sociology, at the National University. Sociologists were seen as pink because they talked a lot about social class, a favorite Marxist category of analysis. Torres did sound like the Cuban revolutionaries when he demanded “fundamental change in economic, social, and political structures,” something he believed Colombia’s traditional Liberal and Conservative Parties could never accomplish. Torres desired revolution, which he saw as “the way to bring about a government that feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, teaches the ignorant, and puts into practice works of charity and brotherly love.” Father Torres joined a guerrilla army and died fighting in 1966.

Religious revolutionaries of the early 1960s saw Latin America’s problems much as the Marxist revolutionaries did. Only a few joined guerrilla armies, however. Most believed that faith and good works were more powerful than guns. They took inspiration from the work of Paulo Freire, the region’s greatest teacher of literacy, then at work among the peasants of impoverished northeastern Brazil. Freire argued that peasants were intelligent adults eager to empower themselves. He believed that methods used with schoolchildren were not appropriate in helping poor adults learn to read. For illiterate adults, learning to read and write meant taking greater charge of their own lives. So Freire developed a method of interactive learning and, to describe it, coined the term “consciousness-raising.”

In 1968, when the Conference of Latin American Bishops held a landmark meeting in Medellín, Colombia, the bishops discussed the usefulness of Freire’s approach. They agreed that the church should take “a preferential option for the poor,” and they discussed the formation of Christian “base communities,” in which believers would gather to read and discuss the Bible in something like one of Freire’s literacy groups. The bishops also talked of liberating people from the “institutionalized violence” of poverty. This was not violence in the ordinary sense. Rather, Latin America’s Catholic bishops had begun to see hunger, ignorance, and rampant disease as tragically preventable damage to human lives. Governments that failed to prevent that damage were committing institutionalized violence. Its victims often saw the damage they suffered as something natural, an inevitable part of being poor. Consciousness-raising in Christian-based communities could unmask institutionalized violence and strip away its seeming naturalness. Here were Catholic teachings designed to undermine,
rather than reinforce, Latin America’s ancient patterns of hierarchy and hegemony. This new message said nothing about suffering patiently through life to gain heavenly compensation. Instead, it called for soup kitchens, day-care co-ops, and neighborhood organizing. It demanded government responsibility. In a region well known for religious fervor, the result might be powerful. That, at least, was the hope of priests and nuns who lived and worked in poor neighborhoods.

“Liberation theology” became the general name for the movement that had crystallized at the 1968 bishops’ conference. Liberation theology immediately stirred enormous interest, both for and against. Conservatives pointed to Father Camilo Torres and cried “Communism!” In fact, the religious revolutionaries did have something in common with the Marxist ones. They shared a sense of emergency and the basic premise that Latin America required sweeping, fundamental change. They were equally committed to relieving the plight of the poor. Both believed that existing power structures were stacked against them. Despite the many disagreements between Marxist and Christian ideologies, these revolutionaries could logically see each other as potential allies.

A conservative reaction began immediately within the Catholic Church itself. Exponents of liberation theology have been passionate and eloquent, but never a majority. By the late 1970s, a new pope, John Paul II, threw the power of the Vatican fully against them. John Paul’s formative experience as a Catholic leader in communist Poland made him inexorably opposed to Marxism, and he believed that Latin America’s religious revolutionaries had crossed the line. The Vatican’s campaign began at the 1978 Conference of Latin American Bishops held in the Mexican city of Puebla. It included the systematic appointment of Latin American bishops hostile to liberation theology and even the official “silencing” of liberation theologians. Likewise, the pope visited Nicaragua in 1983 to support a conservative archbishop against Sandinista revolutionary leaders who were Catholic clergy and exponents of liberation theology. (The Sandinista revolution will be discussed in the next chapter.) “Silence!” shouted the pope three times at the angry pro-Sandinista crowd, in a memorable moment of direct confrontation. Gradually, the liberation theology movement lost momentum in the 1980s before even 1 percent of Latin Americans had participated in a Christian-based community.