

# **EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY**

**VOLUME 10**

---

**Volume 10 • Number 2 • April 1986**

---

**Evangelical  
Review of  
Theology** p. 103

to, exercises the function of a *determining principle*. It has this role in virtue of its being described as '*scientific*', that is to say, true of necessity.

In this core, we can distinguish several components.

2. According to the logic of marxist thought, the 'analysis' is inseparable from the *praxis*, and from the conception of history to p.128 which this *praxis* is linked. The analysis is for the marxist an instrument of criticism, and criticism is only one stage in the revolutionary struggle. This struggle is that of the proletarian class, invested with its mission in history.

3. Consequently, for the marxist, only those who engage in the struggle can work out the analysis correctly.

4. The only true consciousness, then, is the *partisan* consciousness.

It is clear that the concept of *truth* itself is in question here, and it is totally subverted: there is no truth, they pretend, except in and through the partisan *praxis*.

5. For the marxist, the *praxis*, and the truth that comes from it, are partisan *praxis* and truth because the fundamental structure of history is characterized by *class-struggle*. There follows, then, the objective necessity to enter into the class struggle, which is the dialectical opposite of the relationship of exploitation, which is being condemned. For the marxist, the truth is a truth of class: there is no truth but the truth in the struggle of the revolutionary class.

6. The fundamental law of history, which is the law of the class struggle, implies that society is founded on violence. To the violence which constitutes the relationship of the domination of the rich over the poor, there corresponds the counter-violence of the revolution, by means of which this domination will be reserved.

7. The class struggle is presented as an objective, necessary law. Upon entering this process on behalf of the oppressed, one 'makes' truth, one acts '*scientifically*'. Consequently, the conception of the truth goes hand in hand with the affirmation of necessary violence, and so, of a political amorality. Within this perspective, any reference to ethical requirements calling for courageous and radical institutional and structural reforms makes no sense.

8. The fundamental law of class struggle has a global and universal character. It is reflected in all the spheres of existence: religious, ethical, cultural and institutional. As far as this law is concerned, none of these spheres is autonomous. In each of them this law constitutes the determining element.

9. In particular, the very nature of ethics is radically called into question because of the borrowing of these theses from marxism. In fact, it is the transcendent character of the distinction between good and evil, the principle of morality, which is implicitly denied in the perspective of the class struggle. p.129

# A Christian Understanding of Liberation

Andrew Kirk

*This article is one of three Abraham Malpan Memorial lectures given at the Mar Thoma Theological Seminary in Kottayam, South India. The other two were entitled, 'The Bible and the Oppressed' and 'Acceptance and Opposition'. They were published by The Christian*

*Literature Society, Madras, under the title, The Oppressed, Liberation and Good News to the Poor.*  
(Editor)

There are many ways of describing the essence and driving force of Western societies today. Many commentators would say that the most obvious aspect of the life of most people, even when this is not fully recognized, is their devotion (in the religious sense) to 'freedom'. Successive revolutions since the end of the 18th century have reinforced the belief that human happiness is to be measured fundamentally by the degree of personal freedom which each individual is able to achieve. In the debate about human rights, for example, people in the Western nations assume naturally that it is civil liberties that are being talked about: freedom from undue constraint by the State; freedom to own private property; freedom to buy and sell in the market place; freedom to choose a particular kind of education for one's children; freedom to travel; freedom to terminate pregnancies and freedom to have sexual relationships with members of the same sex. The latest freedom which seems to be on the horizon already is that of being able to do all one's household transactions, and a lot of office work, by computer from one's house. We might call this last freedom, the freedom not to have to converse with people!

There is a sense in which this concept of freedom is linked to advances in modern technology (e.g. the realm of fertilization in the field of medical science). Likewise oppression is easily understood as that which modern science is able to liberate us from: the drudgery and monotony of life and physical disabilities.

Without doubting the many, lasting, beneficial uses to which scientific discovery has and can be put, the Western notion of freedom is largely an illusion—a chasing of shadows—for, in many ways, Western peoples have lost the art of *being* human. Life (as in the parable which Jesus told) tends to be measured by the abundance of things which are possessed. Perhaps, it would not be too far fetched to suggest that the only real freedom people actually have is that of choosing which bondage they are going to live under. This conclusion [p. 130](#) should not be taken as a desire to detract from technological knowledge as such—for physical and spiritual freedom ought not to be set against one another—rather it is a warning against an increasingly narrow definition of what it means to be human, the result of the loss in the West of any firm base for moral and spiritual values.

In many parts of the Third World there ascends up from 'the wretched of the earth' a cry for freedom. There is no illusion here! Where life consists of a 24 hour struggle to exist, personal and social freedoms take on a wholly different meaning. People living under the daily constraints of physical necessity feel deeply that the whole of life is being subordinated to a set of structures or circumstances (in a quasi-religious sense) over which they have absolutely no control. Life is a matter of survival within a system which is controlled by others, ultimately hostile to their interests: a political mafia, a military caucus, the international banking system, landlords, middle-men. At the bottom of the heap in society it looks very much as if the whole of existence is the result of an inextricable fate working itself out. Such a view is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the belief that life is about the freedom of choice.

In spite of the fact that the vast majority of humankind has to toil in circumstances of poverty and oppression, the longing and demand for freedom is never wholly extinguished. There are substantial reasons therefore, for affirming that the main characteristic of our modern world, despite all the counter signs, is that it is intoxicated with the idea of freedom and incensed against every form of oppression (whether real, or imagined). Ruben Alves, a Brazilian theologian and sociologist, captures well the modern mood:

‘Man is free for the simple things of life ... Free to chat, to drink and eat, to remain inactive in pure contemplation, to enjoy the sex game, to play. He is liberated for humour, which exists only when man does not take himself too seriously, when he is not dominated by messianic obsessions about his power to create history ... Man is free, even to live in captivity, without either losing the erotic sense of life because of the frustration of a future made closed, or without becoming drunk by eroticism as a compensation for the loss of future’ (*A Theology of Human Hope*, p. 157).

## THE INFLUENCE OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY ON CHRISTIAN THINKING

The essential emphasis of Liberation Theology as a Christian reflection on freedom and liberation has been that human liberation is of one piece. Liberation, as it effects human beings, cannot be divided into an inner and an outer realm. In this sense, it has become a protest against **P. 131** the long tradition of thought in both the West and the East that attitudes and intentions can be substitutes for actual change in society. It is also a powerful protest against the churches for making liberation into something purely individual, internal, otherworldly and future. The effect of the dichotomy between the inner and the outer realm of life has been to divorce faith from political action.

José Miguez calls this belief a Hellenistic view of liberation: ‘... the emancipation of the soul from the cares, appetites, and ambitions of the body and the world, in order to be dedicated to contemplation and communion with God’.

Moreover, he accuses modern theology of perpetuating this ‘internal and individual concept of liberation by linking liberation ... to the integration of man with the universe of moral values ... to the emancipation of the spirit ... to a flight from ‘the objective’ from the world of things ... to a world where objective reality can be explained, dissolved or ignored in mental and mystical processes’ (*‘Theology and Liberation’*, *I.R.M.* 61, 2411 Jan. 1972, pp. 68–69).

It is a firm conviction of Liberation Theology that it is by a judicial, not uncritical, use of the Marxist understanding of the way in which societies work that one may come to a more complete perspective on liberation.

*Firstly*, liberation is not either an explanation of a reality or the future projection of a theoretical ideal, rather it is a project—something that has to be worked for by stages with sacrifice and determination.

*Secondly*, liberation has to do with the whole of human life and with every human being. No-one can be free until all are free. My personal liberation can only be achieved in the liberation of others. The first, in some circumstances, may be just as difficult to realize as the second—to quote José Miguez again:

‘The project of liberation embraces the interests of all because it offers to all better possibilities of human fulfilment. But the ideology of oppression hides this reality from the dominant classes and hardens them in their resistance to change. Hence the importance of the de-ideologizing task.’ (*Toward a Christian Political Ethics*, London, SCM Press, 1983 p. 108).

*Thirdly*, Marxism is both a useful tool to analyse concrete slaveries in the political and economic spheres from which human beings need liberating and also a programme for action. Nevertheless, it is ultimately insufficient, for it does not consider the reality of man’s alienation from God, who is the only true foundation and meaning of existence. As a result Marxism distorts as well as clarifies the total dynamic of human history and relationships between different sectors of society. **p. 132**

*Fourthly*, full liberation is reconciliation with God through, and by means of, the historic work of salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ within, and only within, the concrete conditions of human existence. Liberation is the freeing of the whole of life from its basic contradictions, antagonisms and divisions, in order that it might become what God intends it to be.

## LIBERATION AND THE MESSAGE OF THE SCRIPTURES

Unquestionably, liberation is one of the key themes of the Bible. One of the leading New Testament scholars of this generation, F. F. Bruce, has called the Apostle Paul, 'the Apostle of Freedom'. Within the Pauline writings the key conviction is that 'Christ set us free, to be free people ...' ([Gal. 5:1](#)). There is a freedom which can only be measured by the scope of Christ's sacrifice for sin and his conquest of death.

The starting-point for understanding the biblical view of liberation is its analysis of the human predicament of oppression (which we looked at earlier). The biblical writers have their explanations of the causes of human misery. In my opinion these are just as valid a statement of reality, which can be observed empirically, as those provided by secular sociology or economic analysis. The biblical perspective (we may call it a theological analysis, if we like) has its own internally consistent methodology and is intrinsically open to verification.

If Paul has a great vision of the liberation which is possible in Christ he is also thoroughly realistic about the causes of its absence. To grasp his in-depth understanding of the problem we should begin where he himself begins to develop the meaning and scope of the Gospel, [Rom. 1:18f.](#): 'The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against every form of godlessness (*asebeia*) and injustice (*adikia*) practised by men who suppress the truth by their injustice.'

This is a magnificently condensed statement of the nature and consequences of sin. The passage which follows is possibly a commentary (technically, a midrash) on the account of the fall of Adam and Eve. Let us notice some of the pertinent arguments:

(a) The fundamental human predicament is ungodliness (*asebeia*). This is later identified as idolatry ([Rom. 1:21-23](#)). Idolatry is, briefly, a decision not to recognize that the world belongs to God, and positively to substitute other created objects as a focus of worship and service. It is a displacement or refashioning of one's understanding of God and his replacement with another object of devotion or [p. 133](#) dedication. This *exchange* is the fundamental cause of all oppression; it is the bottom line, as it were, in one's explanation of the cause of every kind of ill-treatment of some human beings by others. It is, therefore, also the place where authentic human liberation has to begin. Equivocation at this point leads to a superficial assessment of the possibilities of liberation throughout society and the spinning of unnecessary and often dangerous illusions concerning change.

(b) The most fundamental consequence flowing from the decision to exchange the truth of God for a fabrication of human ingenuity is that all human reasoning and emotional life has become warped and twisted. Both in theory and in practice humankind has bartered a God-centred view of reality for one centred on only one aspect of life. In political terms, this one reality may be freedom, justice, revolution, order, democracy or the class-struggle. The human view then becomes elevated to the level of an absolute verity, usually substantiated by an appeal to one religious value or another (creation, nature, law, kingdom) or to a 'scientific' explanation of society and its workings. Paul has no hesitation in calling this whole process one of 'exchanging the truth of God for a lie ...' (the lie about which we spoke earlier). We might say that, insofar as human beings refuse

to recognize with seriousness the self-manifestation of the God and Father of Jesus Christ, their perception of the world is bound to be distorted at every level.

(c) As a result of faulty reasoning and a corrupt emotional life many other important, negative consequences flow. Paul describes these in terms of the perverted human relationships which were typical of the Gentile world of the first century. We might well use the word 'oppression' in its individual, political and economic dimensions to cover the list of shameful acts given in [Rom. 1:29–31](#). The result of corruption is the destruction of human life in all its aspects (v. [27](#)), summed up by the one word 'death' (v. [32](#))—God's final judgement on human beings as they remain in their stubborn unbelief.

(d) Human beings find themselves caught in a vicious circle: the more they believe the fundamental lie about reality, the more they practise a perverted form of existence, the more they believe the lie—'they suppress the truth by their injustice' (v. [18](#)).

This passage from Romans gives us, then, the substance of Paul's analysis of the human predicament. At one level it is clearly a matter of belief (a faith-commitment) that this analysis is true. At another level, that of practice, verification is possible as a matter of observation of normal human behaviour. Idolatry is a fundamental, diagnostic tool for explaining the meaning and dynamic of oppression in all its forms. [p. 134](#)

The fulness of liberation arises out of a correct assessment of both the causes and the symptoms of oppression. The means of liberation are set out in the whole letter to the Romans, and in particular in chapter [8](#). The conclusion of Paul's writings, as indeed the whole of the New Testament, is that liberation is impossible without redemption. A price has to be paid to atone for both sin (idolatry) and sins (injustices and oppressions). Human beings cannot pay the price themselves, either by moral earnestness, political action or compassion for the distressed. Only the Son of God, totally free of all idolatry and injustice, could atone, by becoming a sin offering ([Rom. 8:3](#)). The New Testament is totally realistic in recognizing that this view of basic liberation is a scandal to those who possess power, wisdom, authority and status and to those who trust in their religious rites and practices ([1 Cor. 1:18ff.](#)). The message of the Gospel is, as we say, totally unacceptable, to those who are not poor or poor in spirit.

Liberation is one model of salvation in the New Testament. It speaks of freedom from the authority and power of the law, sin, the powers and, eventually, of death itself. It is far from being an abstract ideal. It needs to become a concrete reality at every level of human existence. As José Miguez has eloquently argued, it manifests itself in love, reconciliation and justice—each one the practical embodiment of 'doing the truth':

'true love cannot remain as intention, in the abstract: it demands to be made concrete. However, in order to do this one must choose a way to concretize it ... When love is confronted with human need in its widest sense, it must choose a strategy ... and become involved in forms of organization' (*Room to be People*, p. 63).

'Reconciliation means in the Bible not the ignoring or explaining away of the contradiction, but its effective removal.... The differences are not conciliated in the new fellowship, but are overcome through repentance and conversion and the creation of a new man. The "new age". does not coexist pacifically with the "old age" but engages in a death struggle. Reconciliation is ... achieved ... through the defeat of the old and the victory of the new age' (*Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Age*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1975, p. 120).

There are two issues which still remain for consideration. Each has generated a certain amount of controversy among Christians. We mention them, though we are not able to resolve all the tensions which exist in each case.

The first issue concerns the relationship between the view of the Old and New Testaments concerning liberation. It is often claimed that the Old Testament has a concept

of salvation which is rooted in this [p. 135](#) present world, whereas the New Testament speaks of a final salvation beyond the end of this world order. It is further stated that the New Testament is not concerned fundamentally with liberation in social terms, but only within personal relationships. Finally, many would argue that God's people existed as a nation in the Old Testament, and that as a consequence, interest is centred upon freedom and order in political terms, whereas in the New Testament the Church, a universal and non-political body, replaces Israel. The Church is a spiritual fellowship, not a political agency.

There is some truth in these assertions. However, they are often exaggerated and frequently wrong conclusions are drawn from right premises. Because of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ the New Testament is conscious of the defeat of death. Death is no longer to be considered the end of human existence, but the transition to a new realm of living. Nevertheless, the new age is portrayed in material terms. Moreover, liberation in the New Testament is clearly offered to all peoples, without discrimination or favouritism, no longer to the members of one nation alone. It is, therefore, entirely separate from any ideas of race or tribalism. At the same time, it is inseparable from belonging to a new universal family, which is essentially inter-racial and inter-cultural. Nevertheless, liberation has to be worked out within this new grouping, whose motto is 'Jesus Christ is Lord', in such a way that every kind of political and cultural assumption and division is challenged. It is vitally important to bear in mind that the 'enemies' that Christ told his disciples to love unconditionally were political and national ones. Liberation may not be directly equated with any particular political action—all of which is ambiguous in terms of the final liberation of the kingdom—; nevertheless, it has extensive political implications.

The second issue concerns the dilemma as to whether it is any longer true to say that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church there is no salvation). This is a controversial issue. Dogmatic statements which seem to be rigidly exclusivist do not tone well with modern notions of tolerance and pluralism. They seem to be arrogant, unnecessarily provocative and in danger of inducing a fatal spiritual pride. The difficulty is enhanced by the modern individualistic notion of salvation. Salvation is the result of an individual's search for the truth of God, and is expressed in terms of a one-to-one relationship with the Saviour.

I do not believe, however, that we can allow such a restricted view of salvation. There is a real sense in which there is no salvation outside the church, for God's purpose of salvation is to form a new kind of [p. 136](#) community. It is true that Christian opinion down the ages has tended to oscillate between individual and institutional notions of salvation. In the first case everything seems to depend on the individual and his initiative, salvation is the result of individual free-enterprise and risk-taking. In the second case everything depends upon the institution. The Church takes care of the relationship. Salvation is the result of having paid one's contributions to a welfare system. Needless to say, both models are entirely inadequate. The New Testament uses organic models to describe the new corporate reality which God is creating—body, family, race, people. God's purposes of salvation only begin with the individual being reconciled to his creator. His ultimate plan is to remake humanity in the context of creating new social structures and relationships. The good news of the Gospel is not that a private salvation is available to those who feel their need of it, but that God is reconciling together peoples who have been divided by walls of hostility and fear. The death and resurrection of the Messiah has, as its end product, the causing of hitherto antagonistic groups to belong to one another ([Eph. 2:14, 16; 3:6](#)). Belonging can only be expressed in a community. That community is the Church. In this sense there is no salvation outside the Church. Liberation has to express itself in

wholly new kinds of human relationships: it needs, therefore, a social context in which to do it.

I understand this reality, not so much as a matter of spiritual pride, or the basis for a false assurance, but as an amazing gift of God and a demand that what is a potential reality by God's grace become a fact through our collaboration.

---

**Dr. Andrew Kirk, formerly a missionary in Argentina, is the Missioner of the Church Missionary Society, England. He is a member of the W.E.F. Theological Commission. p. 137**

# Black Theology

Lindsay A. Arscott

*Printed with permission*

*This paper (edited) was presented at the Caribbean Association of Bible Colleges' Conference in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, March 1985.*

## I BLACK THEOLOGY: ITS ORIGIN

While it may be admitted that black theology was made prominent by writers of the 1960s and 1970s, the roots of black theology go further back in history. Marcus Garvey (1887–1940), a strong Jamaican advocate of black religion is regarded by many as the apostle of black theology in the United States of America. Ferm describes him as a forerunner Of the Black Muslim and other black protest movements in America, who advocated a black God and a black Jesus.<sup>1</sup> The brilliant Civil Rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., concedes that Garvey was indeed the apostle of black religion. Speaking at Garvey's memorial shrine in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1965, King is quoted by Drake as saying:

'Marcus Garvey was the first man of colour in the history of the United States to lead and develop a mass movement ... He was the first man on a mass scale and level to give millions of Negroes a sense of dignity and destiny, and make the Negro feel he is somebody.'<sup>2</sup>

Marcus Garvey was a religious teacher. Garvey's concept of God may not have been as radical as his more recent counterparts, yet one cannot fail to see an intimation of black theology in his teachings. Garvey is quoted by Burkett as saying:

'Whilst our God has no colour, yet it is human to see everything through one's own spectacles, and since the white people have seen their God through white spectacles, we have only started out (late though it be) to see our God through our own spectacles ... We Negroes believe in the God of Ethiopia, the everlasting God—God the Father, God the Son

---

<sup>1</sup> Dean W. Ferm, *Contemporary American Theologies* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Clair Drake, Foreword to *Garveyism As a Religious Movement* by Randall Burkett (Metuchen, N.J. & London: Scarecrow Press, 1978), p. 15.