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Liberation Theologies: Looking at Poverty from the Underside

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The world map on my wall was prepared by an 'Aussie'. It looks upside-down. The Australian continent is top centre. To its left is, South America, dropping like an hourglass into Central America and the United States. Below and slightly to the right are the vast masses of Asia and Europe, and at the far right, Africa.

This is how the world is viewed—from down under.

A comparable approach to social theology has emerged south of the border. It comes from the attempt by Latin American Christians to understand their history and experience in light of a rediscovered Bible.

More than 20 nations in Middle and South America have shared a common situation for four centuries. It includes the confusion of cross and sword, the political and cultural suppression of huge ethnic nations such as the Quechuas and Aztecs, economic exploitation of the masses by powerful oligarchies, and a blind, heartless official religion that has affirmed the rich but abandoned the poor.

The emerging 'view from below' is frequently called the 'Theology of Liberation'. It is really a family of theologies, ranging from conservative to heterodox.

CHARACTERISTICS

The liberation theologies display at least three identifiable characteristics:

They share a prior commitment to the poor. Prior to what? To everything else. In liberation theologies, this priority means more than simply recognizing our 'preferential option' to defend the poor and minister to them. It also acknowledges that in a particular way, God speaks through the poor. The gospel cannot be understood until it is seen from their perspective. 'Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.

Justo and Catherine Gonzalez have underlined this truth in *Liberation Preaching* (Abingdon, 1980). Using the illustration of the North American folk hero, the Lone Ranger, and his mute Indian helper, Tonto (in Spanish, 'stupid'), they say, in effect, 'What is currently happening is that Tonto has finally decided to speak up, and is making much more sense than the Lone Ranger ever did….' p. 111

Their whimsical analogy continues, 'The Lone Ranger, with his mask, his white horse, and his flashy gear, thought he knew all about doing justice. But Tonto is telling him that one can only know injustice when one suffers it…. The word of the gospel today, as in the times of Jesus—as ever—comes to us most clearly in the painful groans of the oppressed. We must listen to those groans. We must join the struggle to the point where we, too, must groan. Or we may choose the other alternative, which is not to hear the gospel at all.'

This position makes the almost 'evangelical' assumption that 'the powerless have readier access to an authentic understanding of the gospel than do the powerful'. This sounds very much like something Saint Paul might have written to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1). It seems to ring true.

We must issue a warning, however. A new understanding of the importance of the poor in the plan of God should not be allowed to swing the pendulum too far the other

way. It is not necessarily true that what is 'good news' for the poor is consequently 'bad news' for the rich. When we take into account the entire biblical context we shall see that we all stand equally naked before the holy God.

In the Bible, not only the poor deserve a preferential option. So do the children, and perhaps the 'stranger that is within your gates', and the widows. God's concern must be understood to be universal and all-embracing.

Liberation theologies espouse a new exegesis or even a new hermeneutic. Bible scholars, such as José Míguez Bonino, have been trying to see the Bible anew from the 'down-under' perspective of the poor and oppressed. This effort has opened up a vast and fruitful understanding of Hebrew roots and scriptural expressions that had perhaps been lost to many of us through inadequate translations or because of traditional misinterpretations.

Until recently, little exegetical analysis had been done of words relating to oppression, poverty, injustice. Yet at least 14 different Hebrew roots, I am told, signify some aspect of 'oppression', regardless of how those words may be translated in existing versions. Exploring these rich veins of meaning throws tremendous light on the nature of God's concerns today.

Likewise, much of the significance of many Old Testament passages is lost to us by the careless rendition into English of certain Hebrew words. For example, the word 'righteousness' is often used rather than 'justice'. Many other such instances could be cited.

Some exponents of a liberation hermeneutic—most of them, as a matter of fact—go so far as to maintain that the reader of the Bible must p. 112 deliberately choose his eyeglasses *before* he begins reading, and that the 'preferential option for the poor' means just that—a deliberate bias or perspective. Without this, the true meaning cannot be known. We must discard our North Atlantic lenses, we are told, and put on Third World ones—we must lay aside the eyeglasses of the rich to use those of the poor. Some even say we must abandon our capitalistic spectacles in favour of Marxist ones. Otherwise, they affirm, we cannot truly discern what God is trying to say.

Yet how correct is this? Certainly it may have some positive value as an exegetical or devotional exercise, but its affirmation as a theological principle seems simply to reject one set of a *priori* factors for another, and it deprives God's revelation of objective authority. Likewise, it appears to deny that the Holy Spirit can bring fresh conviction or understanding to the reader who has failed to put on his a *priori* spectacles.

Liberation theologians are 'doing theology' in a sociological context. Fifty years ago, when I was in college, theology was thought of as a Christian philosophy. Consequently, to prepare for the ministry one studied philosophy, apologetics, logic—and perhaps some psychology (to understand the conversion experience and to apply Christian truth to personal needs). At that time the social sciences were in their infancy as academic disciplines.

Today, the situation has changed. The social sciences are demanding much more attention. And the theologians must be versed not only in anthropology, but also in sociology, political science, and economics as well. On balance, philosophy and apologetics receive less attention. Theology is to be *done*, not just *learned*.

The problem is that most university graduates in Latin America assume that the Marxist theory of social dynamics is the valid one. The struggle between the classes is said to be the motor of social progress. And, superficially, the social experience of the continent *seems* to support Marx's theory. Many Latins see this in the history of Spanish colonization, the traditional conflict of liberals versus conservatives, the exploitation of indigenous tribes and imported slaves, the *'patron-peon'* dichotomy, the current economic oppression of the urban masses, and numerous other factors.

Thus, if they begin by analyzing the problem in Marxist terms, it is easy for Latin Americans to see the Christian solution in the same categories. Need caused by sin is equated with economic oppression, and salvation becomes social liberation. If the world view is one of social conflict, then liberation will be seen in the same terms.

However, the biblical world view is not one of dialectical p. 113 materialism. The Bible sees humanity as existing in a crucible of cosmic conflict—caught in a struggle between the divine and the demonic. The war is not between capital and labour, or the bourgeois and the oppressed (although these conflicts may also exist), but it is between God and Satan, good and evil. If this is the case, we cannot be satisfied with Marxist analyses, despite any superficial light that they may shed.

Liberation theologies are almost irresistibly attractive to Latin Americans. They jibe with Latin social theory and promise immediate and political solutions to the excruciating problems presently endured. But they offer an ephemeral promise—one not rooted in basic, cosmic reality. Unless sin and salvation are understood in terms of deliverance from Satan's power, they are not understood at all. Human solutions that are developed within the superficial parameters of dialectic materialism will never get to the root of the problem.

CONCERNS OVER LIBERATION THEOLOGIES

We are left with a number of profound concerns as we work to understand the view from down under. The critical generalizations that follow may not be entirely accurate in all cases, but they show which way the wind is blowing.

1. *Politicization*. Liberation theologies affirm the social responsibility of Christians, but invariably they stumble over the rock of politicization. It is impossible to stay out of politics; it is the very nature of liberation theology to get involved in politics. Political solutions are, however, always human, always finite, always error-prone.

To think that the Exodus of God's chosen people should be the paradigm for revolution in the Sierra Maestra or the Peruvian Andes is somehow to overlook some basic principles of Bible interpretation. Were Fidel Castro's revolutionaries God's chosen people? The Exodus should be seen as a paradigm not of a secular revolution but of the Christian church.

Eventually, political interests always succeed in snuffing out spiritual intentions, as a study of the Cuban, Chilean, Guatemalean, and other revolutionary situations will reveal. The Basic Church Communities movement in Brazil, for example, has demonstrated it. A politicized church is a church on the skids because it is a here-and-now church, without 'eternity in its heart'.

2. *Pelagianism*. It is impossible to keep universalism and Pelagianism (earning salvation partly by acquired merit) out of liberation theologies. Salvation by works may not be openly espoused, but it is p. 114 certainly implied in the concept of socio-politico-economic liberation from oppression. This is a part of the liberation theologies' Roman Catholic baggage. And it is not easy for a liberation theologian to avoid the trap of universalism.

3. *Atonement: moral influence only*. Liberation theologies unconsciously revert to pre-Anselmic theories of the atonement of Jesus Christ. Anselm's 'satisfaction' theory, whereby the Mediator satisfies the demands of God's righteousness while vicariously dying on cross for sinful human beings, was the foundation on which the Reformation was built. But liberation theologies rest on an theory of 'moral influence'. Here again, the Catholic impact is evident.

4. *Substitutes for spirituality*. The liberation theology movement has spawned a multitude of substitutes for the real thing in the Christian life and experience. For example, evangelization frequently has become nothing more than an effort to create an awareness that will prepare people for political action.

5. *Confused values*. Even worse, the movement has often exhibited non-Christian values. An effort to raise a people's political awareness, for example, can easily result in bitter hatred of landlords. Any modelling of class conflict itself becomes conflictive. And when working in horizontal, social contexts, it is easy for Christians to be trapped by materialism, humanism, and other such concepts.

6. *Loss of the Holy Spirit in method*. There seems to be a certain incongruity between the exercise of the gifts of the sovereign Holy Spirit and the almost exclusively man-centred methodology of much liberation thinking. Leaders of the movement have yet to define convincingly the Holy Spirit's role in social revolution. Many observers would say it cannot be done. Pneumatology is conspicuously absent from liberation theologies.

7. *Misunderstanding of Scripture*. Instead of enhancing the work of Christ and understanding its spiritual power, liberation theologies reread the Scripture to depict Jesus as a messiah of political involvement. This rereading often distorts the truth. It misses the paradoxes of faith, the spiritual measurements of personal commitment, the quality of love, the mystery of holiness, and the sinfulness of sin. In short, it diminishes the supernatural dimensions of a personal relationship with God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit our Advocate.

In our search for a social theology to clarify the mission of the church, it is appropriate, as Samuel Escobar has pointed out, that we find in the theologies of liberation an important challenge and stimulus to our evangelical faith, but never a viable alternative to it.

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Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation

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This Instruction was adopted at an Ordinary meeting of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the' Faith and was approved at an audience granted to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect, by His Holiness Pope John Paul II on 6th August 1984, who ordered its publication.

Evangelicals will want to identify with many of the positions outlined in this important document. The remainder of the Instruction will be published in the next issue of Evangelical Review of Theology.
(Editors)