

GORRINGE, Timothy, *Redeeming Time: Atonement Through Education*, London UK: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1986.

This book is a theological reflection upon a practice of involvement by students of Tamil Nadu Theological Students of South India, in the life of “the poor” (see pp. 16-18). The students helped Indian villagers to think about their situation. The villagers saw that things did not have to be the way they were, and that there was something they could do to change them. Once their consciousness was changed in this way, they found the confidence and energy to act. The effective force behind their change in consciousness was a sense of the elusive presence of God, who had entered into solidarity with their situation, through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and was continuing to educate them in the midst of the events of history, by the power of the Spirit. As they committed themselves to respond to the educating activity of the Spirit, so they were liberated from their consciousness of oppression, in order to attain justice and become fully human. All religious talk and action was to be judged by whether it witnessed to God’s love for the poor, and so to the human project.

The emphasis in this book is on doing, rather than having, on political involvement, rather than on making use of “spiritual” aids to self-improvement. Quasi-material views of “created grace”, of the “Spirit” as private feeling, of the sacraments as substances with power, or of the church as a self-serving institution are challenged. Christianity is described not as one more religion in competition with other rival religious. Instead it is the way of Jesus, the crucified, who laid aside all claims to position and power, in order to be with the powerless, and show them their true humanity. So the question of, “What was God doing in my history before we received the gospel?” could be answered by saying that the story of the gospel does not destroy the story of each culture to which it is given, but adds another chapter, which sets all that had gone before in a new, more-fully-human, light.

So, the gospel provides a valuable corrective to all attempts to turn Christianity into a means of escape from the world, or a device for gaining an absolute version of human power. Instead, it affirms progress in what is truly human, through solidarity in God’s redeeming work; such an affirmation “entails trust in the promise that love is stronger than hate, and life than death, which we receive in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It recognises the terror of history, but refuses to assess history solely in terms of its negative

products. It discerns, for instance, in the women's movement, or in the programme to combat racism, small signs, at least, of the possibility of a more-human future, and, in these signs, it discerns the pedagogy of God's Spirit, realising a solidarity in redemption to break the hold of, and set people free from, solidarity in sin" (p. 56).

As with all books that offer a corrective, there is a question of whether the author has gone too far the other way. The message of the book could be mistaken for one of salvation by "doing", that is, by "works". We do need the salvation of what we are, the healing of our fallen human natures, if we are to perform right action. What we do is an expression of what we are. As a result, our actions show up the limits and divisions of our limited, and divided, human nature. Yet, in God, being and doing are one, for His being is infinite love, and His acts are infinitely loving, as we see in Jesus' unlimited self-giving, His sacrifice "for many". Our contact with Him is a reception of, and incorporation in, His loving sacrifice, not merely as a physical act, but as a spiritual communion, a personal relationship that unites being and doing. As Timothy Gorringer rightly says, this relationship, this growth in "solidarity", is not an instant total change, but a historical process that needs to be worked out in action. At the same time, that action leads to the healing of our natures, their "divinisation", whereby love becomes "second nature" to us. Salvation, then, involves historical liberation, and personal conversion, as two aspects of the same process. We do not need to assume that the poor are already perfect by nature, and only have to be set free from the chains of historical oppression. We can call on them to repent, and receive the gospel that heals.

Timothy Gorringer uses the term, "the poor", as a label, and hardly describes them as particular people, who may have particular weaknesses. He does admit the need of the oppressed to avoid becoming oppressors (p. 220), but his book does not have the sharpness of focus of Gustavo Gutierrez's: *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, which deals candidly with the temptations of apathy, or bitterness, faced by the "poor", and their need for a spirituality, that will enable them to "love", as well as to forgive, their oppressor. It would be good if Timothy Gorringer could provide a description of the practical experience of "solidarity with the poor" in India, on which his book is based. If the book is an appeal for the voice of the poor to be heard, it should be followed by a book that contains that voice.

Meanwhile, *Redeeming Time* is a passionate and urgent appeal for justice for the poor, in solidarity with Jesus Christ, the poor one. It sets an example for all theological colleges, of the use of practical pastoral work among the oppressed, exploited, needy, weak, or defenceless, as an exercise in local theology, and an integral part of a theological programme of critical reflection upon practical experience of liberation.

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