

What Future for Liberation Theology?

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When Gustavo Gutiérrez published his *Teología de Liberación: Perspectivas* in 1971¹, he can hardly have imagined the significance his work would take on in the following decades. The very title has become embedded in the language of a whole generation of theology students as a rough description of a school of thought, or a movement, that reaches from the Philippines and Korea, through Asia and Africa, to Latin America. For some people, the question of liberation theology has become the yardstick against which all other theological approaches are to be measured, and the movement to which one's response is the indicator of the seriousness of one's Christian commitment.

As a university chaplain, I have found that the appeal of liberation theology to students has contributed greatly to the formation of the community I serve. Its prophetic voice appeals strongly to compassionate men and women who are trying to give a Christian expression to their own concerns about poverty, violence and exploitation. In my own ten years of involvement with British solidarity organisations and human rights groups focussed on Central America, particularly Nicaragua and El Salvador, I have seen the flood of books by liberation theologians since 1971 eagerly read by colleagues, Christian and non-Christian alike. Nothing, it seems to me, has done more in recent years to provide a Christian vocabulary for our common task, or to manifest the teaching of the Second Vatican Council:

The Joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.²

Yet certain aspects of liberation theology have become the grounds for much angry debate, the silencing of some theologians by the Vatican, vitriolic attacks on Curial officials by those sympathetic to their 'victims', and a good deal of mutual misunderstanding. The publication two years ago of a collection of essays in honour of Gustavo Gutiérrez by some fifty theologians might help us to identify some of the causes of this breakdown in communication.³

Not surprisingly, the book has a vaguely celebratory feel. The essays were first delivered at a month-long symposium organised by the Maryknoll missionary order to mark Gustavo Gutiérrez's sixtieth birthday, the thirtieth anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood, and the fifteenth of the publication of the English translation of his *A Theology of Liberation*. There is much here to be celebrated, after all. And yet there is much that might make one uneasy, too. It is partly the adulation heaped on poor Gutiérrez's head by so many of the writers, which must have made him cringe more than once.

Gustavo is a model for human relationships and he has a gift for

friendship. His rare spirit is nimble, intuitive, direct, with a subtle sense of humour. He has friends all over the world and he recognises all of them at meetings and gatherings, thanks to his exceptional memory.⁴

Do people really talk or write this kind of gushing prose about people they know and love? One might rather worry that the lack of reserve, the absence of any sense of irony, the unnuanced, uncritical devotion to the man might go hand in hand with an unnuanced, uncritical attitude to liberation theology and an intolerance of any attempt to question or challenge it.

The Wicked Critic

Other parts of this book give grounds for precisely this worry. There is a frequently repeated expression of hostility to 'European' theology, the theology that arises from the Church of the colonial Old World, which is by implication a colonial theology, and as blind to the suffering of the poor as the Conquistadores were in the sixteenth century, and as IMF and World Bank officials seem to be in the twentieth. Thus, whatever criticisms are presented to liberation theology which might raise questions as to its methods or its conclusions can be dismissed out of hand as 'European' or 'colonial'. So Jon Sobrino can write

Rather than engaging in dialogue with other theologies, philosophies or cultural movements, liberation theology has faced up to the basic Latin American reality of under-development and oppression.⁵

Liberation theology alone has faced up to the reality of oppression. It has no need to enter into dialogue, then. It has no need to answer the criticisms or questions of 'other theologies.' The experience of violent exploitation suffered by Latin American Christians seems to guarantee in advance the authenticity of anything they have to say, and to make it immune to European criticism—the sufferings of European Christians, under Nazism and Stalinism for example, do not seem to have given European theology any special privileges, however.

Edinburgh theologian Alistair Kee experienced this kind of automatic dismissal at a conference in Europe where theologians were told in advance by visiting Latin Americans that they would not be able to understand what liberation theology had to say. 'We were not told anything except that we would not understand it, even if we were told it.'⁶ I was similarly ruled out of court myself a few years ago when in El Salvador I raised an objection to the view expressed by Jon Sobrino' that God suffers when we suffer, not just in the human suffering of Jesus, but *as God*. The answer to my objection was simply that I was a European and that I had not seen 60,000 of my people die, and that I therefore had no right to question Sobrino's insight which had been born of such suffering.

Such a rejection of criticism on the sole basis of its provenance is damaging to the communion of the Church, to the possibility of discussion between theologians of different opinions, and to liberation theology itself. In this particular instance I also thought it a little strange that my interlocutor

defended Sobrino's thesis on these grounds, since not only is Sobrino himself a European [a Basque], but his *Christology at the Crossroads* (1978) primarily reflects his work until 1975 in Germany far more than his subsequent work in El Salvador, while his view of the suffering of God is almost identical to Jurgen Moltmann's—whose name appears in Sobrino's index more than any other single theologian's.

There is perhaps a certain inevitability in this *ad hominem* argument. Liberation theology places a heavy emphasis on theology's dependence on praxis, and it must be very tempting for a theologian to deal with critical questioning by ignoring the content of the criticism and referring simply (and dismissively) to the supposed practice (or 'praxis') of the critic. This is not very far short of saying 'My critics are not only wrong, but they are wrong because they are wicked.'

And so Tissa Balasuriya⁴ makes a facile connection between Chalcedonian Christology and the colonial despoliation of India, partly by misrepresenting the claims of Chalcedonian theology. Thus the truth (or at least the usefulness) of traditional Christology is called into question, not on the basis of its content, but on the basis of the practice of those who claimed to believe it. 'It (Chalcedonian Christology) has led to the genocide of several peoples.' The uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth expressed by the traditional doctrine of the Incarnation, for Balasuriya, points inevitably towards the devaluing of other religious and cultural forms by Christians, and thus to their destruction.

The possibility that Chalcedonian Christology bears within itself the seeds of the most radical criticism of the evils of colonialism is simply not entertained by Balasuriya. Yet it might be argued that the implication of the Chalcedonian formulation which Balasuriya rejects points to God's definitive identification of himself, in the moment of Christ's crucifixion, with the victims of violence. Such an absolute identification of God with the suffering victim stands against all the mythologies of scapegoating and of blaming victims for their own suffering, including the victims of colonial violence.

Likewise, Dorothy Solle writing about 'God's Pain and Our Pain,' delivers a fine, moving account of the old Catholic tradition of 'offering up' one's pain, and yet mars it by her method of defending the Sobrino-Moltmann denial of God's impassibility. A theology which deals with an omniscient, omnipotent and impassible Creator reflects, for Solle, 'the sadism of its creators.'¹⁰—those who disagree with her are not just mistaken, but sadistic! Is this really the way for an 'enlightened Protestant', as she describes herself, to conduct her business?

The Infallible Poor

The connection between theory and praxis in theological method may be of considerable importance and value, but it should be made with care and discernment. The connection should be used in conjunction with a certain courtesy towards one's interlocutors. The theory-praxis connection raises other questions, too, for liberation theology. In particular the repeated claim that it is

the poor who are the engineers of their own liberation, that they have a special epistemological privilege in understanding the nature of sin and the remedy for it, and that they are therefore the true and original preachers of the Gospel. There is, of course, a great deal of truth in all this. But when the 'preferential option for the poor'—which is God's option before it is ours—implies that the view of the poor themselves becomes such an all-embracing horizon that all other criteria are disallowed, liberation theology is in trouble. There is much in this book which illustrates this point. 'The poor lead us to the core of the truth that sets us free', we are told. 'The initiators of that theological reflection are the poor themselves, the agents of historical transformation.'¹¹ 'Poor people are appropriating the Bible and stamping it with their own spirituality.'¹²

The danger implicit in such a privileging of the 'view from below' is that anyone who claims to be speaking for the poor or to be representing the biblical view of the oppressed will feel pretty sure of himself or herself, and will feel able to dismiss any criticism as an attack on the poor. Yet a cursory look at the sociology of liberation movements, both within and outside the church, should put paid to what is little more than a romantic fantasy. About 5% of Latin American Christians belong to the Basic Christian Communities. That is a lot of people, but they are not by any means the majority of the poor of the region.

Furthermore, contrary to the rhetoric of some writers, many of those who do participate in the Basic Communities are not of the poorest sectors of society, but of the slightly better-off, more stable and less desperate families, people with some personal resources, with a little education, with the time and energy to invest in organising the work of the communities. It is relevant to observe here that when Clodovis Boff worked in the Rio Branco area in western Brazil among the very primitive rubber gatherers, people at the very margins of their society and terribly poor, those he tended to work with most were not the rubber-gatherers themselves but the traders, 'that is, as a representative of the church he is associating with that class which has some power and is therefore the closest thing to the bourgeoisie in the region.'¹³

Another problem with the privileging of the 'voice of the poor' as a criterion of Christian authenticity is that it now seems likely that, with the exponential growth of the fundamentalist evangelical and pentecostal sects in Latin America, a great many of the poor have laid hold of the Bible and 'stamped it with their own spirituality' in ways directly contrary to the views of the liberation theologians. It has long been clear that the social and political effects of *this* 'church of the poor' are deeply harmful to the dispossessed of Latin America. In 1980, the newly installed Reagan administration in the USA published the *Santa Fe Report*, which lamented the Latin American Catholic Church's failure to defend US interests, and recommended the use among the poor of 'free churches' (evangelical sects) as an antidote to the subversive influence of liberation theology.¹⁴ The mere fact that the poor are embracing a particular theological doctrine or method is not necessarily evidence that it will do them, or anyone else, any real good.

It is fundamental to the Christian tradition that our response to God is primarily to be seen in our response to the poor, to those who are suffering oppression, exploitation and violence, to those who are marginalised and dehumanised. Christ comes to us and questions us in them. It is therefore a matter of discipleship that we should constantly test our lives and actions according to the criterion: how will this help to free men and women from poverty and suffering? At the heart of Christian spiritual life is the opening of our ears to hear the cries of the poor which cry to heaven, to open our eyes to see their suffering in spite of the systems of injustice that conspire to make them invisible. But it is against a certain romanticisation of the poor that Ignazio Silone writes:

I haven't the illusion that the poor possess the truth ... I know that their spiritual poverty is often as great as their material misery.

One of the reasons that poverty is a Bad Thing, surely, is precisely that those who suffer it are deprived not only of material goods but also of cultural goods, of the right to participate socially, economically and politically, and so are correspondingly vulnerable to being manipulated by those in power. Tolstoy was an optimist who 'against every evil summoned the image of the primitive but sublime goodness of the Russian peasant.'¹⁵ But though there is doubtless some truth in Tolstoy's view, we ought to know better by now, having seen the ARENA party, the 'Party of the Death Squads', voted into office again in El Salvador by the Salvadoran poor; having seen the Sandinistas who, for all their faults, were in my view the only real hope for a just peace in Nicaragua, voted out of office by the war-weary poor of that country; having seen, in this century, Mussolini's ascent to power on the backs of the poor, and in this country the attraction to so many of the poor of racist ideologies, or the glamour of momentary attempts in the South Atlantic and the Middle East to retrieve whatever it was that made Britain 'Great'.

The American writer James Baldwin discovered an effective method of finding out who were the racists in any group of people he met. He would spend a few minutes talking complete nonsense, and the racists were the ones who let him get away with it because he was black. A similar refusal to reject or criticise nonsense when it comes from poorer communities is no less prejudiced, and no less prejudicial to good theology. But instead Cardinal Stephen Kim tells us:

The minjung [the people] are clearly the salt of the earth. Their unique quality is the tremendous lifeforce within them, which in itself shows *how close they are to God*.¹⁶

Just as the critic can be disarmed by an appeal to his or her European origin, short-circuiting the usual process of theological discussion, so a position propounded as the view of the poor who are 'close to God' is suddenly beyond criticism. One can understand the frustration of other theologians and pastors of the church who are preemptorily excluded from discussion by this manoeuvre. It is hardly conducive to open and honest dialogue, and is ever more likely to push ecclesiastical authorities into authoritarian positions, dialogue having been excluded in advance.

Burying the Past

Another way of disarming your critics, especially in an age when a high premium is placed on modernity and novelty, is to assign them to the rubbish bin of history: they belong to a forgotten theology, a redundant past, an ecclesiological dinosaur. Thus Sobrino's general dismissal of 'the Greek metaphysical notion of God's being'¹⁷, and of Chalcedonian Christology which 'assumes we know who and what God is...'¹⁸ It becomes easier to sweep theological fossils like Thomas Aquinas into the heap of other discarded ideas, naturally, if you misrepresent him. Thus Dussel can say of St Thomas that he contributes to the feudalisation of Christianity by making the 'feudal lord' a member of political society *simpliciter*, while the serf was only a member *secundum quid*.¹⁹ But the only reference Dussel gives at this point (*Summa Theologica* 2a 2ae, 57, iv) reveals that Thomas is not talking about the difference between lords and their serfs, but is developing Aristotle's distinction between political authority proper on the one hand, and on the other the kind of authority that father's have over their children and masters over their servants. The distinction is between the relationship of two citizens related only by their common citizenship (hence political *simpliciter*) and the relationship of two people who are bound to one another in other ways.

The temptation to exalt the modern by expressions of contempt for the past is strong. Penny Lernoux's description of the Church's history in Latin America, for example:

Originally it had been the proselytising arm of the Spanish empire... It took the Spanish part in the wars of independence and afterward allied itself with the most reactionary elements among the Latin American élites.²⁰

No mention here of Las Casas and the other preachers of the gospel who spent their lives (and sometimes lost them) in defending the lives and rights of Indians. He is mentioned by another contributor,²¹ but he appears there almost as an isolated individual, as a minor theological freak in an otherwise uniform theology of colonial violence and genocide.

What is ignored by both Lernoux and Balasuriya is that Bartolomé de Las Casas, far from being alone, was made Bishop of Chiapas shortly after persuading the entire assembly of the church at Mexico City in 1536 that preaching must be by example and not by force, and that the Church had a duty to chastise anyone who harmed or enslaved the Indians. In 1540 Las Casas' *Brevisima Relacion* was influential in the promulgation of the New Laws by Charles V of Spain demanding the liberation of Indian slaves, the cessation of conquests and the suppression of the dreadful *encomienda* system. Pope Paul III had meantime accepted the findings of the Mexican assembly and issued his encyclical *Sublimis Deus* which asserted that the Indians were 'by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ ... nor should they be in any way enslaved.' This is not evidence of a Church unambiguously on the

side of the powerful, the 'proslytising arm of the Empire.'

Neither is the record of the Church in many of the wars of independence as one-sided as Lernoux believes. In 1812 we find a Spanish official complaining, the ecclesiastics were the principal authors of this rebellion. ... One can count by the hundreds the generals, brigadiers, colonels and other officers, all clerics, in the bands of the traitors, and there is scarcely a military action of any importance in which priests are not leading the enemy. [i.e. the rebels]²²

The rebellion of 1810 was started in the Mexican town of Dolores in Michoacan by the local curate, and among those captured or convicted for their part in the uprising were 244 secular priests; and 157 monks or friars.

The model of ecclesial and theological progress from some dark and dreadful past into the bright light of a new tomorrow is tempting. It might help us to avoid some hard thinking and to provide easy answers to difficult questions, but it will not strengthen the urgent demands of liberation theology. On the contrary, these demands are more strongly made when they arise from the depths of the Church's tradition and experience rather than from a contemptuous rejection of it all by misrepresentation.

Progressing beyond "Progress"

There is one chapter in the book, that by James Cone, which describes the change in Martin Luther King's thinking from an early bland optimism about progress into a hope against hope, a hope in the face of seeming impossibility, 'no matter how powerful are the opponents of injustice.' It is precisely the difference between optimism and hope, hope even in the face of failure and catastrophe, which Liberation Theology needs to take on board. Perhaps the influence of marxist ideas on liberation theologians is responsible for the fetish of progress. But it is one of the least convincing areas of marxist thought, and even Marx occasionally questioned the certainty of the eventual arrival of the political-economic Eschaton. Such nineteenth century notions of progress are not vital to liberation theology and where they obstruct more essential work they should be dropped. Certainly, the movement will be weakened as long as it is formed so deeply by the desperate Oedipal urge of some modern theologians to murder their fathers—Chalcedon, Augustine and Thomas - in order to establish their own identity.

The myth of a sterile and defunct past whose theology is a snare and an illusion, and of a future in which all the pain and estrangement of the past and the present will disappear and in which theology will finally lay all its 'ideological' content aside, is a tempting one. But Christian hope is surely not to be reduced to this. It is perhaps precisely when the future is most bleak and unpromising that the distinctiveness of Christian hope is manifest, since the immediacy of God's kingdom to all points of human history means that, whether or not events of the twenty-first century justify the optimistic prognosis of the 1990's, those who seek that kingdom share already in God's life.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries most direct protests against social injustice were in prose. They were reasoned arguments written in the belief that, given time, people would come to see reason. Today this is by no means guaranteed. The suffering of the present and the past is unlikely to be redeemed by a future era of universal happiness. ... The future cannot be trusted. The moment of truth is now. And more and more it will be poetry, rather than prose, that receives this truth. Prose is far more trusting than poetry; poetry speaks to the immediate wound.²³

Theologians should consider whether perhaps it is this 'poetry', this sense of the immediacy of God to all history, past and present, that best communicates our faith. Certainly it is better able to do so than a blind 'trust' in the twenty-first or the thirty-first century.

Left is Best

Other passages in the book raise another worrying dimension of liberation theology. There is the implicit assumption that leftwing political movements are the paradigm for liberation, no matter what other characteristics they may have. Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian of Shanghai, who is described as 'Chinese-appointed' [does this mean he is of the Patriotic Church?], declares without any apparent irony,

China is a liberated country. ... China has been politically liberated.²⁴

For the bishop, all it requires now is 'modernisation.' One can't help wishing he had communicated this a little earlier to the demonstrating students in Tiananmen Square: he could have saved them a lot of trouble.

Similar narrowly ideological dualistic positions appear elsewhere. Dussel's accusation that 'Rome of today has identified capitalism with Christianity' is just silly. His claim that Rome has condemned liberation theology ignores the facts—such as the Pope's insistence in a letter to the Brazilian bishops that liberation theology was 'not only opportune but useful and necessary.' And the dualism of Roman/Latino, central/peripheral, capitalist/socialist, European/indigenous, rich/poor, oppressor/oppressed, past/future leaves no room for him to deal with the moral and political failure of Stalinism, of Maoism (whether in China or among the Peruvian Senderistas who are still butchering peasants in Ayacucho pour encourager les autres). The task of liberation is far too urgent, far too central to the Christian vocation, to be crammed into such an unnuanced and reductive framework.

Euro-American Voices

If this were all there were to the book, its title would be laughable, for liberation theology would seem to have little future at all. But there are chapters which raise vital questions which liberation theologians will surely address and benefit from. Aside from Cone's chapter on Martin Luther King mentioned above, Harvey Cox's defence of popular religion deserves to be taken with the utmost seriousness. Much liberation theology has overlooked or

even dismissed the critical power of popular devotions, and tended to reflect a rather more 'sophisticated' world-view and cultic taste. Yet the transformative power of much popular religion is far greater than prejudices would allow. The promises made by poor barrio-dwellers in Lima, as the flower-decked statue of Martin de Porres passes by, have contributed greatly to the attempts of Christian leaders to develop health promotion and educational resources there, among the poorest. At Christmas, Salvadoran refugees, with statues of Mary and Joseph, remember their quest for a place in Bethlehem to stay the night, wandering from house to house singing songs beseeching the householder for *posada*, or hospitality. A quaint piece of folk religion, but one which has developed among poor people who manifest a solidarity, such as I have seldom seen elsewhere, with those who have been violently driven from their land and their homes.

In another important contribution to the book, Nicholas Lash (the only British contributor) warns that

there are no straight lines of inference to be drawn from discipleship of the Crucified to the construction of social policy.²⁵

Liberation theology must heed this warning. In Central America one network of Basic Christian Communities is practically at war with another, because each party is certain that their particular social and political programme is implied by an option for the poor. They each believe with Leonardo Boff that 'a theology that does not help to produce life, justice, more human relationships and greater happiness cannot call itself Christian or be an heir to the apostolic tradition.'²⁶—another manifestation of the connection of theory and praxis. But they are each convinced that *their* theology and *their* social programme will do these things, and that the other party's will not. They would do well to heed Lash's appeal for a way of conjoining the celebration of the Lord's Supper and the creation of human brotherhood [sic] that is

'ironic, dialectical, attentive to the unexpected and unpredictable, sensitive to provisionality, and protective of the *openness* of the future.'

It is not always clear what the result of loving the poor will be. Helder Câmara is the man now widely recognised as the star of a million Christian Aid posters, where he complains that he is attacked as a communist when he asks why the poor are hungry. He is the same Helder Câmara who, as a young priest, was one of the founders of the 'October Legion', the Brazilian fascist movement of the 1930's influenced by the newly established dictatorship of Salazar in Portugal. Making an option for the poor does not always produce immediate unanimity among all believers on which social or political line to follow.

Gregory Baum points out²⁷ that too much emphasis on the socialist project of 'unmasking structures of domination' can lead to the alienation of the poor who often find, precisely in their existing communities, their traditions and their past, the radical values which liberationists propose. He is surely right to point out the attractions of fascism in the Europe of the 1930's, when the socialist movement seemed to promise the poor a merely economic liberation

at the cost of values they cherished, especially 'identity and community.' It is a warning that writers like Dussel should heed, with their tendency to a certain dualism. Baum challenges both traditionalists and radicals to discover that their tradition is a radical one.

Arthur McGovern notes the limitations of Marxist class analysis in the Latin American context, where much of the oppression arises from patterns of concentrated land-ownership that predates 'capitalism,' or from 'state ownership' of industry. He sounds very like the Pope in *Laborem Exercens*²⁸ as he points towards a 'socialisation' of work and the means of production which is not obtainable simply through state control, but through the proliferation of a range of intermediate bodies and representative organisations. He suggests 'widespread distribution of private property, including workers' cooperatives' as an alternative, and stresses 'the importance of free, independent political organisations.'²⁹

These are important critical voices, and the voices of people deeply sympathetic to liberation theology. But Lash is English. Baum lives and works in Canada. McGovern and Cone are from the USA. It is to be hoped that such constructively critical voices are not ignored on the grounds of their European or North American—and hence bourgeois—accents, and that the sense of irony and openness that Lash argues for is maintained and developed.

- 1 Published in English as *A Theology of Liberation*, SCM Press, London, 1974.
- 2 *Gaudium et Spes*, Preface, para. 1.
- 3 *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honour of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, Marc Ellis and Otto Maduro (eds.), Orbis Books, New York, 1989. Pp. xvii + 518.
- 4 Page 99.
- 5 Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 1978, p.33.
- 6 Kee, *Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology*, London, 1990. p.xi.
- 7 Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, SCM Press, London, 1978.
- 8 Pp. 340–1.
- 9 Page 342.
- 10 Page 326.
- 11 Page 34.
- 12 Page 506
- 13 Kee, page 261, examining Boff's book, '*Feet-on-the-ground-Theology*'
- 14 See *Theologies of Repression*, Márkus, *New Blackfriars*, January 1986.
- 15 RW Johnson, *News Statesman and Society*, 6 July 1990.
- 16 Page 21.
- 17 *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. 195.
- 18 *Christology at the Crossroads*. p. 8
- 19 Page 244.
- 20 Page 78
- 21 Page 338 Balasuriya.
- 22 Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*. Page 408.
- 23 John Berger, *And our faces, my heart, brief as photos*. London 1984. Page 95.
- 24 Pages 16 & 17.
- 25 Page 160
- 26 Page 45.
- 27 Page 222.
- 28 Page 283–4
- 29 Page 283.